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ACOUSTIC GUIDE

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2021

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“At every point, I am trying to look for connections, bridges for our audience. How can we invite them in and make this music stick? Discovering how to do this is a pathway to the classical guitar’s long-term sustainability and success in the concert hall.”

—ADAM LEVIN

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THE FRONT PORCH

Collings CJ-45 T



JOEY LUSTERMAN

I can't tell you how many times someone has confidently told me that the guitar was doomed to extinction due to the dominance of electronic sounds in popular music, and that fewer and fewer young people were being drawn to the instrument as they had been in great numbers for several generations. But I've always taken exception to these bleak prognostications and continue to see plenty of evidence to the contrary.

Two obvious examples are Molly Tuttle and Billy Strings, highly skilled young guitarists who have reconciled the bluegrass tradition with contemporary influences, receiving accolades from both purists and mainstream fans with their unique takes on flatpicking. Similarly, the sisters Rebecca and Megan Lovell, shown on the cover, use bluegrass, blues, and other traditional acoustic styles as the foundation of the roots-rock songs they play with their popular band, Larkin Poe. While Rebecca Lovell might be often seen onstage with a Fender Stratocaster, her constant companion is a Beard Deco Phonic Sidecar—check out her finesse on this vintage-inspired flattop in a video that the Lovell Sisters recorded exclusively for the magazine, a duo version of their song “She’s a Self Made Man,” also transcribed in this issue.

At the same time, there are many young classical guitarists proving that the instrument and its literature are alive and well. In the May/June issue, Mark Small profiled Irina Kulikova, who in her recent work has revisited her formative influences growing up as a prodigy in Russia.

Here he covers Adam Levin, another bright and youthful guitarist. In a relatively short career, Levin has performed and recorded a wide-ranging repertoire of eras and styles, most recently championing the work of contemporary Spanish composers while also establishing a nonprofit organization to enrich the lives of young people through the classical guitar.

Another strong indication of the guitar's good health can be found in the marketplace. Between 2019 and 2020, sales increased by 15 percent on the whole. It is evident that many new players took up the instrument and others reconnected with it while sheltering in place in the early days of the pandemic. Iconic companies like Fender and Taylor reported record sales during a period when they initially feared the worst. And the industry continues to feel robust—just look at the many new offerings at all price points in our annual year-in-gear roundup. Anecdotally speaking, it tells me something that one of the costlier new instruments for 2021, the Collings CJ-45 T, has been selling faster than the Austin-based company can build it.

At the start of a new year, I'm hopeful that these promising trends will continue apace. Stay tuned as AG covers more of the talented young players who will ensure the guitar's survival—not to mention the new instruments you can score, and the music you can learn on them, to help do the same.

—Adam Perlmutter

Adam.Perlmutter@Stringletter.com

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Jakob Dylan

GUITAR TALK



ANDREW SLATER

A Cinematic Vision

Jakob Dylan uses his trusty Gibson J-45 to bring his movie-like songs to life

BY JAMES VOLPE ROTONDI

They're all scenes from a movie," says Jakob Dylan, describing the nine tracks on *Exit Wounds*, his first album with his band the Wallflowers since 2012's *Glad All Over*. The album is a slow burn of bold folk-rock songs, filled with ringing Martins and lyrical images that linger long after the final F major chord has faded. Given the 51-year-old singer-songwriter and guitarist's penchant for the open-ended phrase in his songs, it's apparent that Dylan is applying his film analogy to albums in general, too.

"It's not even an especially lofty thing to say," he qualifies. "It's true, especially if you write them like that, with that idea of a whole work in mind." For Dylan, each song on an album has the job of not only moving the listener but of setting the stage for the next one.

"That's the reason why waltzes can work on an LP or even instrumentals. You're trying to hit the key points that shape the record; how you close out the first 'side'; how you start the second side. I'm always conscious of those things when I make a record," he says.

DYLAN'S WORKHORSE

And how does Dylan generate the songs toward a broader work in the first place? With the help of his longest-serving songwriting partner, a mid-1960s Gibson J-45. "I was probably 17 or so when I bought my J-45," he says, "and it couldn't have been more than a few hundred dollars back then. Now, I've picked up lots of great guitars since then, expensive ones even, but a lot of them just come and go. I don't quite know why that

one's always stuck around, but I've written the majority of all my records on that guitar.

"Certain guitars just have life to them, and you don't always know why," he continues. "Meanwhile, you can spend way too much money on a vintage guitar that is just dead. I keep going back to my J-45, without any real expectations, and it has never let me down."

While the J-45 may be home base, Dylan is an omnivore when it comes to guitars, having toured and recorded with a wide variety of great instruments over the years, including his very recognizable 2003 Martin D-42, a gaggle of prewar Martin 000s, and vintage electric axes like his Gibson ES-330, Gibson SG Custom, and Gretsch Falcon.

"I tend to gravitate to the guitars that you can really dig into, the ones that are kind of screwed-up in some way, that sound kind of dirty," he says. "The pristine guitars that are really smooth-sounding regardless of what you throw at them I use mainly for touring, because that's mostly going to be me strumming a lot to project and maintain rhythm. But if I really want to dig in and pull out some more gritty sounds, I'll lean on the ones that have a lot more character."

While Dylan generally either plays with a medium pick or bounces back and forth between two main fingerpicking patterns, there's one accessory that nearly always comes between him and his strings when he's writing tunes: the capo. "They're crucial to the way I write," he says. "It's just so productive for giving a song life; to be able to move the capo around and find out where your voice and the guitar are sitting together best, and where it all just feels good."

But the capo doesn't always translate to performing the songs live. Dylan's current Wallflowers lineup features Dutch bassist Whynot Jansveld (Gavin DeGraw, Sara Bareilles, Jonatha Brooke), whom he leaned on as a kind of bridge to translate the songs from the J-45 launch pad to the wider band arrangements. "Songwriting and playing with the band are two very different environments," Dylan says. "What I often find is that once the band kicks in onstage, those higher capo positions just don't sound so great. So the process before a tour is to relearn how to play all of the songs in regular open position—which is a lot of work! But it beats having to remember and to change capo position on every song, not to mention having the guitar sound thinner and smaller."

It took Dylan some time to make the transition; in many early shows with the Wallflowers he played a Fender Telecaster with a capo, a feat he's not keen to reproduce anytime soon. But he admires certain troubadours who have a

knack for it. “I saw [country legend] George Jones play about 25 years ago,” Dylan recounts, “and he played most of the way through a song with a capo on. When the key suddenly modulated, George managed to move the capo to a different fret—while he was singing—and barely even looking at the neck. He kept on strumming the exact same chord shapes without a stop. It was incredible.”

NAVIGATING THE MYSTERY

Dylan, whose father, Bob Dylan (see “Tangled Up in Blue” on p. 56), arguably invented the modern acoustic songwriter, tends to be far less topical lyrically, and often more symbolic, even cryptic, than his legendary namesake. But he shares a similar mastery of turning conventional phrases on their heads, waxing metaphysical, and telling a story with haunting efficiency, even a nonlinear one, as he does so well on the Wallflowers’ 1990s classic “One Headlight.” (“So long ago I don’t remember when/ That’s when they say I lost my only friend.”)

The songs on *Exit Wounds* echo that same cinematic narrative style and occupy a similarly

wistful emotional space. This verse from *Exit Wounds*’ “I Hear the Ocean When I Wanna See Trains” captures Dylan’s smoky, sepia-toned lens well: *In the morning, a fool is quick to pretend/ This night too does not begin. Now with a shot glass coming up again/ Elbows down to the bitter end/ You’re in the bar light with your smoke rings/ And a stranger who’s leaning in/ And I’m*

‘I tend to gravitate to the guitars that you can really dig into . . . ’

—JAKOB DYLAN

hoping to black out and land/ Long before you’re more than friends.

“Always be suspicious of the songwriter who can tell you exactly what a song is about,” Dylan cautions. “That may mean they’ve had too much time to think about it. We’ve all had the experience of learning what they’re really about long after we’ve written them.” Instead, he suggests, carve out those moments in your day when you

can put aside all your busy work and mind chatter, and just slow down and feel every amount of feeling you’ve got.

And, Dylan advises, don’t wait for inspiration to necessarily pop up and strike first. “If you wait to be inspired, you may wait for years,” he stresses. “You’ve got to just get writing and accept that there will be bad stuff as well as good stuff. You’ve got to be unafraid of that. Just write, and trust the process of elimination as you get toward a whole album. Sure, the best stuff often just falls on your head, but if you don’t go to work at this because you’re waiting for that, it could be a long, cold winter.

“It may sound clichéd at this point,” he continues, “but try to stay out of your own way. If you write songs and you analyze them too closely you’re in danger of sabotaging yourself. Even those phrases and lines that I’m not 100-percent sure what they mean? Well, I’ve learned to appreciate that those lines only came to me that day and didn’t come to anybody else. You’ve got to appreciate those gifts and grab them when they come. So trust yourself—your instincts are just as valuable as anything you’ve had to learn.” **AC**



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BLUES SISTERS

How Megan and Rebecca Lovell of Larkin Poe traveled from bluegrass to blues rock and beyond

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

Back in 2005, a young bluegrass band from Georgia known as the Lovell Sisters took the stage on the public radio show *A Prairie Home Companion* for the Talent from Twelve to Twenty contest. The youngest Lovell, Rebecca, was only 14, but already a commanding singer and mandolin player, joined by Megan, 15, on dobro and Jessica, 19, on fiddle. With tight instrumental work and seamless sibling harmonies, the band won first prize, and more awards soon followed—including a mandolin contest win for Rebecca at MerleFest in 2006, and a John Lennon Songwriting Contest grand prize in 2008. The Lovell Sisters were clearly on the rise.

After a few years on the bluegrass circuit, though, Jessica opted out of the

touring musician's life, prompting Rebecca and Megan to regroup and reinvent their sound—this time tapping into their love of classic rock and blues. So in 2010 they traded mandolin and dobro for guitar and lap steel, and named their new act Larkin Poe, after an ancestor who was actually a cousin of Edgar Allen Poe.

In the realm of roots rock, too, the sisters have risen fast. They've performed with Elvis Costello and Keith Urban, scored a Grammy nomination (for 2018's *Venom and Faith*), and toured internationally with a full-band show that's both electrified and electrifying, powered by Rebecca's soulful vocals and rhythm guitar, Megan's soaring slide, and their telepathic harmonies. As Larkin Poe they also frequently play as an acoustic duo (well, semi-acoustic, with



Megan playing a Rickenbacker lap steel). They've created hundreds of homegrown duo videos that have racked up, at this writing, 45 million views on YouTube, including inspired covers of artists as diverse as Skip James, Tony Rice, James Taylor, Led Zeppelin, and the Bee Gees.

Larkin Poe's latest album of new original songs, *Self Made Man*, came out in the early days of the pandemic. The sisters remained productive during the live-music shutdown, creating not only online content but two releases: the acoustic covers album *Kindred Spirits* and now *Paint the Roses*, an orchestral collaboration with Nu Deco Ensemble recorded during a concert livestream.

As songwriters, guitarists, interpreters, and performers, Rebecca and Megan—now in their early 30s—are firing on all cylinders. To learn more about their journey from acoustic roots music to amped-up rock, I caught up with the sisters by phone from their home bases in Nashville. They also created an acoustic duo video, especially for AG, of their song “She’s a Self Made Man” that you can watch on AcousticGuitar.com and learn how to play on page 60.

To start back with the Lovell Sisters days, what first hooked you into playing bluegrass?

Megan: We first went to a bluegrass festival when we were 13 years old. It was called MerleFest. We were blown away by getting to see all of these incredible musicians at the top of their game, improvising and sitting in with each other, and then the joy of the audience and participation and dancing. We just loved the energy, especially coming from a classical background where we were used to reading the notes off the page. It introduced us to this whole new world of what music could mean.

At the time you were playing violin and piano, right?

Megan: We started out on violin when Rebecca was three and I was four, and we picked up piano a few years later. We played in symphonies and quartets and did recitals, like a lot of kids. But when we went to that festival, we felt immediately that we wanted to be involved in roots music. We quit our classical lessons cold turkey and became the most uncool teenagers, picking up banjos and mandolins. That’s when I was fully introduced to slide guitar in the form of dobro.

My understanding is that Jerry Douglas was an inspiration.

Megan: Yeah, absolutely. We grew up listening a lot to Alison Krauss and Union Station, which

featured Jerry Douglas. I knew the sound of the instrument, but I had never really connected the sound to how the instrument was played and what it looked like. And when I saw it being played, I was blown away by the vocal quality and how unique it was. I knew immediately that was what I was headed for. I guess me and frets don’t really go together, because I tried to play guitar and banjo and mandolin, but it just was not working.

Rebecca, what drew you to mandolin?

Rebecca: I typically say that the mandolin connected with my frenetic energy as a preteen, but I think, honestly, it was the easiest transition. Violins and mandolins have the same tuning, so I was able to quickly find my way around just based on the similar stringing, and I learned how to use a pick. I really love mandolin. It’s been a huge part of developing my instrumental prowess. I don’t

‘I love the vocal quality of the dobro, but the lap steel can sound like an opera singer. It feels like my true voice!’

—MEGAN LOVELL

play it as much anymore, based on now being in an electrified and drum-heavy group, but it was a big love of my life for many years.

Do you think mandolin, and the chop you supply in a bluegrass band, helped you play guitar with such a strong sense of groove?

Rebecca: Well, thank you for saying that. I would agree that the mandolin player’s role in any bluegrass band is to serve as the drummer. I do think it helped me develop a more metric sense of time, and it gave me a feeling of rhythm within myself. It was a big step up for me in transitioning to the guitar.

String bands are about creating drive without drums. How did you find the transition into playing with a full rock band?

Rebecca: When we started Larkin Poe in 2010, that’s when we first started playing with a drummer. So I think for two, two and a half years, it was very awkward for us to sync into more of a drum-orchestrated environment, learning to trust the drummer and to write music that had an affinity with drums. So it was definitely a transitional period for us. But at this point, I can’t imagine not having a

drummer. Perhaps in the future, Megan and I will do an acoustic tour and the two of us stripped back, because we do love it very much. But I certainly enjoy having a rock performance under our belts at this point.

Megan: Absolutely. I think one of the hardest things, going from a string band to an electrified drum-driven band, is how loud everything was. But now that’s no problem. In fact, it can never be too loud.

When you play as an acoustic duo, you create a very full sound. Do you think that’s a reflection of your string-band background?

Megan: I think even more so it’s our relationship as sisters. I mean, we’ve been playing together and singing together since we were four years old. All of that growth together has made it very easy to read each other’s minds musically and perform together no matter what the format is.

Bluegrass is also great training for vocals, especially with its emphasis on harmonies. Does that impact the way you sing together today?

Rebecca: Definitely. I think we are lucky in two aspects: One, we started out singing in a choir and had a great vocal coach who really placed an emphasis on tight harmonies and pitch. And it’s the same thing in bluegrass. So that’s always been a huge focus for us.

Rebecca, you use a lot of dropped-D tuning on guitar. Is that a key part of your sound?

Rebecca: I have written a lot in dropped-D over the years. I like the fact that you can get some power-chord vibes on the low strings of the guitar, and it occupies a lot of space, given that we’re a four-piece band and I am the only rhythm player. Megan is our lead guitarist, but she is tuned to open G [G B D G B D], so the lowest she can go is a G note below middle C. So getting more beefiness out of my guitar has been a focus for me as a writer.

But I also am known to wildly cross-tune my guitar and see what it inspires in terms of writing. I am a big Chris Whitley fan, and he would have just random tuning after random tuning written onto his setlist. I thought that was really cool before I had to actually implement the tunings onstage under the time pressure of an audience waiting for you to get your guitar in tune. So that is why we have to bring a bajillion guitars.

Can you give some examples of tunings you use?

Rebecca: My favorite one is B A B E B E. I wrote



a song called “Freedom” in that tuning. I have a Strat that can withstand being tuned down to a low B, which is pretty damn low for an electric guitar. But it sounds cool. It’s very ominous.

For “Hard Time Killing Floor Blues,” a cover of a Skip James song, I tune to open D—D A D F# A D—which is cool [note that the original is in D minor, D A D F A D]. I have a song called “Pink and Red” that is tuned to C G D G B E.

Megan, what was the transition like for you from dobro over to lap steel?

Megan: Very gradual. At first I had a little bit of a hard time accepting the lap steel. I think the idea of taking on pedals and figuring out how to use an amp and how loud everything is can be a little bit overwhelming at first. But once I started to get into the lap steel, I have to say it was like, “Goodbye, dobro.” Not that I don’t love the dobro. I think it’s a beautiful instrument, and I still pick it up from time to time. But the lap steel is my true love.

It’s a fairly easy transition. There’s definitely a different style in which you play lap steel. Dobro is more like you manhandle it, whereas the lap steel just has more sustain naturally. You have to play it with more finesse, because if you dig in, you’re going to get a brittle tone. You need a more gentle touch.

I love the vocal quality of the dobro, but the lap steel can sound like an opera singer. It feels like my true voice.

How do you think about the relationship of your two instruments in your arrangements? The lap steel seems more like another singer than a second guitar.

Megan: Absolutely. We’ve had to be very aware of the different spaces that each element of our show occupies. There’s Rebecca’s voice, and then there’s my lap steel, which can occupy a similar range to her voice. So I have to be very careful, since I don’t want to clash with her. And then we also want to want to fill out the bottom end as much as possible.

Rebecca: If it’s Megan and me as an acoustic duo, how I play acoustic guitar is strictly trying to cover rhythm and chords. So if we’re playing, you know, in E, I am required to play the low E note to frame out the low end. Within our band, I’m allowed a little bit more leeway to work in some riffs. If our bass player’s playing the bass and some key parts, it allows me to break away. But I’ve always viewed myself predominantly as a utility player, just to shore up the gap. I don’t get too fancy.

Megan: I don’t know about that. You are such a huge riff player. Most of the solid riffs in our

The Lovell Sisters—Rebecca, Jessica, and Megan—made a splash on *A Prairie Home Companion* and at MerleFest.



COURTESY OF LARKIN POE

songs come from the guitar, and then I am over top, like a lead guitarist or sometimes like a third vocalist. We are a very riff-heavy band.

Do you come up with those riffs as part of the songwriting process, or later when you’re arranging a song as a band?

Rebecca: Typically, my song inspiration starts with the music, so having a riff or chords is the foundational stone from which I then build melody and lyric. But I do feel really lucky to be in a position in the band with a lot of creative support from my sister. Megan really translates melody when she is improvising or playing in general. So if there’s ever a song that I don’t feel has a cool riff or something compelling, we’re able to break it back down to the bones together as a team and write some riffs in the studio.

Megan: I think that comes from the music we listened to growing up. If you think about the Allman Brothers or Eric Clapton, there’s always going to be a main riff that shows up through the song. All of the bands we really admire take so much from blues, which is a huge riff-based sort of music.

You’re such a powerful live act, but you’ve also done a lot of almost hip-hop-style recording, piecing together tracks and using loops and samples. Do you see playing live and layering tracks like that to be totally different processes?

Rebecca: At the core, Larkin Poe is my sister and me, and that can be somewhat limiting in that neither of us are natural-born drummers. I play the drums, but very badly. A lot of times there’s only so much that you can verbally express to another musician about what you’re looking for in terms of, you know, bpm, swung or not swung, or are we talking about eighth notes or 16th notes or four on the floor or a shuffle. So having technology at my fingertips to map out exactly what I hear in my head when I’m writing a song, in turn allows an audience to get a clearly distilled version of what we are creatively trying to put forward.

In essence, whenever we record a song in the studio, the musicians listen to the way in which we portrayed the song [in the demo] and learn it in a way that pays respect to the original version while also being fresh and appropriate for the stage. We definitely allow arrangements



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to shift and flex for live performance. But I do think part of what makes us unique as a band is the ability to marry our very organic musical knowledge with GarageBand or Logic or Pro Tools, to let the creative vision run free—even further than it might otherwise.

Megan: That's sort of the feeling behind *Self Made Man*. But *Kindred Spirits* is essentially live, just recorded in the studio with the two of us, and the new record [*Paint the Roses*] is live with Nu Deco Ensemble, so we definitely are branching out into that side of things too.

Do you see the Nu Deco album as reconnecting with your classical beginnings?

Rebecca: Absolutely. It was very nostalgic to

hear original compositions interpreted through the lens of a classical format, very full circle. I feel even more grateful that that performance, which was intended to be a one-night occasion, was so special and we were able to release the music as an album. When we listened back to the board tapes, there was something true and worthwhile that we wanted to share with our fans. It is very much a left turn from what we do in the studio and also on the stage as Larkin Poe. We like throwing curveballs.

Megan: A lot of the songs are from the album *Self Made Man*, which we wrote intending to perform live on worldwide tours for 2020. But then we didn't get to play any of them live, so it was great to have a space where we could

perform them on a stage with a lot of power behind us. We're also very excited to be releasing a song called "Mad as a Hatter," which people have been requesting for so many years.

I'm curious about "Danger Angel," one song from *Self Made Man* that you revisited on the new album. What can you tell me about writing that?

Rebecca: "Danger Angel" is one of those songs that I wrote sitting at my kitchen table with my acoustic guitar. I was looking to write something fairly meditative and hypnotic. I used a resonator guitar in the studio for the *Self Made Man* recording. The main loop of the song is this guitar riff that repeats over and over again.

Even when the chord changes, the riff stays the same.

Rebecca: Exactly. It's kind of a prog-rock move, where you keep reframing the melodic elements based on what chord is happening underneath. But yeah, that song was kind of a little guilty pleasure for me. I was just messing around and wrote something lyrically that made me smile. It's sort of this superhuman representation of a bad girl, of a danger angel. It has old bluegrass-style harmony singing, very high and lonesome and a little bit dissonant. I brought it to Megan, and she dug it.

Do you two work on songs more on the arranging level, or do you also co-write?

Megan: Rebecca is the main songwriter for the band, especially lyrically. So a lot of the song ideas come from her, and then I'll come in and we'll add that special Larkin Poe flavor at the end. She is the lead singer, and even though I do write, I think my style of writing sometimes differs a little bit vocally. It feels very important to us that the lyrics and melodies she's singing are authentic to her. I love the songs that she writes, so I'm very pleased to come in and make them Larkin Poe.

Looking back at your days as the Lovell Sisters playing bluegrass, how do you draw the line from that music to what you're doing now?

Megan: Man, that's a good question. I think that we look back on it as all part of one big long story. The Lovell Sisters days feel like so long ago, like a different lifetime, but we also know that the lessons that we learned during those times are definitely affecting us now. And we are the same people, even though we play very different music. That roots music lives deep inside us and still affects what we do today and paints the unique picture that is Larkin Poe. I just feel very thankful for the way we got started in music.

AC



JOSH KRANICH

WHAT THEY PLAY

Rebecca Lovell's go-to acoustic guitar is a Deco Phonic Sidecar, a small-body flattop built by Maryland's Beard Guitars, best known for its resonator instruments. She plays her Sidecar, which takes inspiration from guitars of the 1920s and early '30s, in all acoustic settings and throughout the *Kindred Spirits* album.

Onstage with Larkin Poe, Rebecca plays mostly Fender Stratocasters along with, recently, a Gretsch Jet. "Both Megan and I rely pretty heavily on a very clean Fender Deluxe-style amp sound: very tube-y, very simple, usually with a short delay, some overdrive, some reverb," she says. "Neither of us consider ourselves to be the Edge! In Larkin Poe we're kind of meat and potatoes when it comes to effects."



Megan still reaches for her Scheerhorn Dobro on occasion, but with Larkin Poe—both the duo and the full band—she plays a Rickenbacker, a black-and-white B6 "Panda" model from the early '50s. In order to play it standing onstage, she uses a holder that attaches on one side of the body and secures it in the optimal playing position. On both dobro and lap steel, she primarily plays in open G (G B D G B D). She uses a stainless steel Scheerhorn bar, metal ProPik fingerpicks, and a Dunlop M-10 Zookies plastic thumbpick.

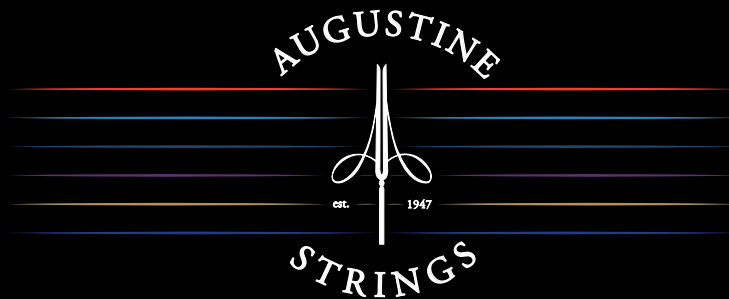
For the lap steel, Megan uses an Ernie Ball volume pedal and a custom TB Drive, a signature pedal built in Germany by Rodenberg for guitarist Tyler Bryant—who, not coincidentally, is married to Rebecca. "I always play with overdrive on the lap steel because it can be a tinny instrument without it," says Megan. "I like a ballsy drive."



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21ST CENTURY GUITAR CAREER

*Adam Levin deftly
bridges multiple styles,
settings, and eras*

By Mark Small





SILVIO RODRIGUEZ

In his relatively young career, classical guitarist Adam Levin has traversed an impressive amount of territory as an international performing and recording artist. The fourth album of his critically hailed series *21st Century Spanish Guitar*, released in August 2021, chronicles the most recent chapter in the Spanish guitar legacy by spotlighting new solo works (and one concerto) by contemporary Spanish composers.

The recording is one among a dozen in Levin's catalog of solo and collaborative projects. His touring and recording schedule comprises solo appearances and bookings with three different ensembles. The Great Necks, a group he founded with grad-school colleagues Matthew Rohde and Scott Borg, has been turning heads by fearlessly reducing piano and orchestral repertoire (such as Jean Sibelius' *Finlandia* and Gustav Holst's *The Planets*) to the guitar trio format with astonishing musical creativity and virtuosity. Duo Mantar finds Levin in league with gifted mandolinist Jacob Reuven playing music by noted Israeli composers. Duo Sonidos, featuring stellar violinist William Knuth, plays a range of music—its 2019 album, *Wild Dance*, includes selections ranging from Gershwin songs to film music to arrangements of concert works by Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Lukas Foss, Karol Szymanowski, and others.

Levin has won first prize in four international competitions and taken top prizes in three others. Additionally, he was awarded a Fulbright scholarship and the Kate Neal Kinley Memorial Fellowship. These honors afforded him the opportunity to live and study in Spain for three years, during which time he commissioned almost 40 living composers spanning multiple generations to write the works he would premiere on the *21st Century Spanish Guitar* series. When the fourth volume was released, it went immediately to Number One on *Billboard's* Traditional Classical Albums chart.

A FIRM FOUNDATION

Levin grew up in Lake Bluff, Illinois, a town 30 miles north of Chicago. His mother is an options trader and his father a clinical psychologist. The senior Levin is also an amateur guitarist and guitar collector who introduced his son to classical guitar. "My father and a great Japanese teacher, Shinobu Sato, taught me in the early days," Levin recalls. "My father would get me up at the crack of dawn, 5 AM, to practice—not without a lot of kicking and screaming on my part. But as I look back on that, it was a beautiful period of time. In the early morning I was so fresh and clear-minded. I really catapulted myself through lots of technical stuff and repertoire."

Adam Levin



MAGGIE MARGUERITE STUDIOS 2016

Sato stressed right-hand planting, scales, and arpeggios, and they worked on the Segovia scales (fingerings for the major and minor scales) and Segovia's edition of *20 Sor Studies*. "By the time I was 16, I was playing the Bach 'Chaconne' and all of the Villa-Lobos etudes and preludes," says Levin. "Sato was staunch about gaining an understanding of a substantial body of repertoire."

When it came time for college, Levin had dual interests he hoped to combine. He sought to explore his father's path by taking psychology and pre-med classes, while also working toward a music career. He applied to NEC (New England Conservatory of Music), where Eliot Fisk chairs the guitar program. "Eliot called my folks out of the blue saying he was impressed by my audition tape and really wanted me to study with him," Levin says. "I had always been star-struck by Eliot; he was at the apex of the guitar world for me. I faced a difficult choice."

As it turned out, Chicago-area Northwestern University, which had a five-year program that would enable Levin to study classical guitar and the sciences, won the coin toss. "The Northwestern program was stronger for what I wanted," says Levin, "but, I [also] became Eliot's private student and went monthly for lessons with him in Boston during the five years I spent at Northwestern."

At the university, he studied guitar with Anne Waller, whom he credits with cementing his musicality and helping him become a solid player. He earned bachelor's degrees in both music performance and psychology before heading to NEC for a master's program with Fisk.

PATHWAY TO MUSICIANSHIP

"I firmly believe that NEC and my study with Eliot was the path toward my becoming a learned musician," Levin says. "He was the kind of guitarist and human being I wanted to be—someone who commanded many facets of life, not just classical guitar, but music in general. Studying with Eliot is a special process. He understands your personality and is so encouraging and idealistic. He always told me to create a global vision and a 21st-century career with many facets. He understood classical guitar and his own career, and he saw that serving the ivory tower was no longer the ideal or where the profession was going. You have to express yourself through many means: collaborations, chamber music, creating arts infrastructure, and finding fresh repertoire. I had a power-packed seven years of study with Eliot."

After earning his graduate degree, Levin's next goal was to study abroad, and with Fisk's input, he crafted a proposal for a Fulbright

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scholarship. The final plan involved Levin going to Spain, where he would study, perform, commission, and record new Spanish guitar music. “I realized it was high time to do what Segovia, [Julian] Bream, [John] Williams, Fisk, [Sharon] Isbin, and others did by championing new music,” Levin says. “That became the genesis for the *21st Century Spanish Guitar* album series.”

He began his Fulbright in 2008, studying with Gabriel Estarellas, a proponent of new Spanish music who gave Levin introductions to many composers. He discovered that a new renaissance in Spanish music was happening, producing a more cosmopolitan, global Spanish music than the beloved Iberian repertoire of the

19th and 20th centuries. He found the basic Spanish musical DNA in the music, but also neoclassicism, avant-garde, atonal, and electronic elements. In addition to the Fulbright, Levin received support from the Program for Cultural Cooperation and the Kate Neal Kinley Memorial Fellowship, which enabled him to continue in Madrid for three years.

Working directly with composers was a new experience. “With all the music I’d studied up to that point, I learned about composers and their music through books and mentors that were secondary and tertiary sources,” he says. “This was an opportunity to talk to the primary sources to get their opinion on how things sounded.”

LIFE BEYOND THE PREMIERE

Levin is optimistic that works from the large body of music he’s brought forth will enter the guitar canon. He cites “Dues Noves Suggestions” by Salvador Brotons, appearing on the first volume, as a piece with a future. It’s lyrical, evocative, and instantly appealing. Receiving “Espacio de Guitarra” (“Guitar Space”) from Cristóbal Halffter for the third album was a particular triumph. Halffter, who passed away in 2021 at the age of 91, was esteemed for his large-scale orchestral works, and it took repeated queries from Levin over the course of seven years to find a time when Halffter could write the piece (in 2015).

Catalan-American composer Leonardo Balada, Fisk had told Levin, “is the epitome of 21st-century Spanish music.” He fuses the old and new worlds and contributed multi-movement *Caprichos* to all four *21st Century Spanish Guitar* volumes. Balada created abstractions on themes of past Spanish masters, including Enrique Granados, Isaac Albéniz, and Manuel de Falla.

Cuban-Spanish composer Eduardo Morales-Caso contributed to three of the four records. Levin worked so frequently with him, that, “Eduardo has become like an older brother to me,” he says. The fourth album features a major Morales-Caso contribution: *Concierto de La Herradura*. “I think this concerto will be the new thing,” says Levin. “It’s a wild piece, expressive, and has an angelic, buoyant second movement. The work is really attractive and super Spanish with a personal voice.”

Also appearing on Vol. 4, Jorge Muñiz’s *Portraits from the Heartland* stands out with its nod toward American bluegrass music. “Muñiz comes from the north of Spain and is a disciple of Leonardo Balada,” Levin says. “Balada has championed folk music through his avant-garde music, and Muñiz feels similarly about folk music. You hear what sounds

like a banjo in the second movement. It is a wonderful piece, and it draws people in. At every point, I am trying to look for connections, bridges for our audience. How can we invite them in and make this music stick? Discovering how to do this is a pathway to the classical guitar’s long-term sustainability and success in the concert hall. I think *Portraits of the Heartland* does this very well.”

A PASSION FOR SERVICE

It was Fisk who ignited Levin’s passion for community service through music during his years at NEC when he began focusing on underserved youth and residents at nursing homes. “I did outreach through the Albert Schweitzer Fellowship to develop programs of study for at-risk high school students” Levin states. “I also worked in geriatric homes across Boston and learned how to present myself to two very different communities.”

The experience affected Levin deeply. “Outreach was not an extracurricular activity but a defining point in my career,” he says. “Through that service, I defined my voice as a musician.” Levin has amplified his outreach efforts. In 2015, together with his Great Necks compadres Borg and Rohde, Levin established Kithara Project, a nonprofit organization with a mission to improve the lives and opportunities of young people through the classical guitar. Kithara operates two guitar education programs in Boston and one each in Albuquerque and Mexico City.

“We provide everything that is needed for comprehensive, tuition-free guitar education: instruments, footstools, music stands, group and private lessons, and field trips to guitar society concerts,” says Levin. “For the students we serve, the guitar is a refuge from the difficult socioeconomic strains, the streets, drugs, and alcohol. Perhaps the most striking of the four programs is the one in Mexico City in a notoriously dangerous neighborhood. We have been fundraising for four years and are building a music school that will be completed this year. It’s been a lot of work, but every time I see those kids, it’s exactly the fuel I need to continue. It has been an absolute joy to share our love of guitar with these youngsters.”

Add to Levin’s very packed schedule roles as professor at two New England universities, artistic director for the University of Rhode Island Guitar Festival and the Rhode Island Guitar Guild, and new father. He and his wife celebrated the arrival of their first son in 2021. With a baby at home, there’s even less sleep, but the kinetic and indefatigable Levin thrives on pushing himself to the limit. He jokes, “Now it just feels like I’m up all night *and* all day!” **AC**



WHAT HE PLAYS

Adam Levin plays a pair of guitars built by Massachusetts luthier Stephan Connor (profiled in the January/February 2020 issue). The Paladina, built in 2010, has a spruce top with a hybrid lattice-and-fan bracing system, along with maple back and sides. Made two years earlier, Super Nova has a cedar soundboard and Brazilian rosewood back and sides. For this one, Connor created an experimental flying brace pattern. Levin played both guitars on *21st Century Spanish Guitar, Vol. 4*. On *Music from the Promised Land*, he used the Paladina exclusively. Levin prefers hard-tension Augustine Regal strings on both instruments.



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2021 THE YEAR IN GEAR

From under 20 bucks to ten grand,
exciting new offerings for acoustic guitarists

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

It was another strange year for the world of gear. Each January, more than 100,000 visitors from around the world normally head to Southern California, where they cram the halls of the Anaheim Convention Center to see the latest offerings from across the musical instruments industry. But due to the pandemic, the annual Winter NAMM was cancelled in January 2021, for only the third time in the show's 120-year history. (Not even the 1916 pandemic stopped the event, but World War II did, in 1942 and 1945.)

Makers pivoted to virtual NAMM showcases. And buoyed by a year of record sales despite—or maybe because of—uncertain times, they introduced an astonishing range of new guitars and accessories, both traditional and forward-looking, at all price points. As usual, throughout the year, *AG* got its hands on some of the best new offerings, from D'Addario's innovative new XS strings to top-shelf instruments by Collings and the Santa Cruz Guitar Company.

Here's an overview of the year in gear, with many of the pieces reviewed in the pages of *AG*: guitars, sound-reinforcement solutions, and more, for players of all stripes. Note that all prices are what you should expect to pay new in a shop, whether brick-and-mortar or online. And for more detailed information, be sure to check out the in-depth reviews in your back issues of the magazine, or online at AcousticGuitar.com.

NEW OFFERINGS FROM THE BIG PLAYERS

The venerable C.F. Martin introduces bunches of new models each year, and 2021 proved no exception.

Boasting a Sitka spruce top and siris or ziricote back and sides, as well as Fishman MX-T electronics with a built-in soundhole tuner, the **D-13E** (\$1,349) gives players an affordable entry point for an all-solid acoustic-electric dreadnought. The **00L Earth** (\$2,249), with its planet-emblazoned soundboard, plastic-free construction, and hemp gig bag, represents Martin's stance on taking action against climate change—and it's a real head-turner to boot.

For players looking to add a little chime to their tonal palettes, Martin introduced the **Grand J-16E 12-string** (\$2,099), an acoustic-electric powerhouse with a Sitka spruce top and East Indian rosewood back and sides, and a high-performance neck taper for enhanced playability. Another new 12 in the lineup, the **D-35 David Gilmour 12-string** (\$5,499) boasts a Carpathian spruce soundboard and sinker mahogany back and sides, a tonewood that Gilmour chose for its richness of sound and appearance. A six-string Gilmour signature version (also \$5,499) has an Adirondack spruce top with Martin's VTS (Vintage Tone System).

AG checked out the affordably priced acoustic-electric **GPC-13E** (\$1,299), a cutaway Grand Performance model with a solid Sitka spruce top, either mutenye or ziricote back and sides, and a Fishman electronics package. Testing a ziricote version, Greg Lowell found the GPC-13E to be an excellent all-purpose guitar, well balanced across the sonic spectrum and easy on the ears and fingers.

Having exited from an ill-fated foray into consumer electronics in recent years, Gibson has clearly shifted the

Clockwise from top left: Martin 00L Earth, Gibson 50s LG-2, Martin GPC-13E Ziricote, Taylor GT K21e, Taylor GT 811e Gibson Generation Collection,, Gibson Tom Petty SJ-200 Wildflower, Martin D-35 David Gilmour 12-string,





Top row (L-R): Taylor PS14ce, Cort Gold-Edge, Fender Acoustasonic Jazzmasters, Collings CJ-45 Traditional
Bottom row: Guild BT-240E baritone, Cordoba Protégé C1 Matiz, Epiphone Inspired by Gibson Hummingbird, Santa Cruz Happy Traum Signature Model HT/13

focus back to its bread and butter: guitars. In terms of acoustics, the legacy maker added to its collection of painstakingly accurate replicas of golden-era classics. Instruments in the Custom Shop Historic Collection now includes everything from the Pre-War SJ-200 Rosewood (\$6,899) to the 1942 Banner J-45 (\$4,999) and 1960 Hummingbird (also \$4,999), all made in Gibson's newly expanded Bozeman, Montana, shop alongside new custom signature models like the Orianthi SJ-200 (\$5,999), Tom Petty SJ-200 Wildflower (\$9,999), Noel Gallagher J-150 (\$4,299), and Slash Collection J-45 (\$3,499).

Meanwhile, Gibson built on the Acoustic Modern Collection of guitars that, with their slim necks, contemporary voicing, and advanced electronics packages, are clearly intended for today's players. 2021 saw the introduction of the J-45 12-String (\$3,399), while the J-45, Hummingbird Standard, and SJ-200 received new finish options, like a traditional ebony.

We auditioned Gibson's Original Acoustic Series **50s LG-2** (\$2,499), an update on a classic originally intended as a budget model

for students and casual musicians, which has become a coveted model on the vintage market. Nick Millevoi, who had been dreaming of owning an LG for years, praised the new iteration's vintage vibe; warm, resonant voice; and outstanding playability.

In the fall, Gibson announced a new series of modern guitars—the **Generation Collection** (from \$999)—equipped with Gibson's new Player Port, designed to direct the sound toward the player's ears for an immersive experience, as well as L.R. Baggs' Element Bronze electronics systems. Stay tuned for more coverage of this affordable series.

While known more for electric guitars than acoustics, Fender does have a long history of making steel-strings, dating back to the 1960s with models like the Malibu and the Newporter taking their inspiration from Southern California beach culture. The company looked back to these Golden State flattops with the **Redondo Mini** (\$199.99) and **Sonoran Mini** (\$199.99), each sporting a short scale length and the iconic six-in-line Stratocaster headstock.

In the last several years Fender has made a big splash with a clever series of acoustic-electric hybrid guitars based on its solidbody shapes—first the Acoustasonic Stratocaster and then a Telecaster version, each delivering classic acoustic and electric tones in a single package. A **Jazzmaster** iteration (\$1,999.99) was introduced last year, and Mark Goldenberg found it to be a pleasure to play, whether as a couch guitar or sophisticated tool for the studio.

Toward the end of 2020, Taylor Guitars introduced a new body shape—the Grand Theater (GT)—and along with it, the new C-Class bracing, which builds on the company's recent V-Class pattern to lend a robust bass response in this compact body size. The Grand Theater line now includes the flagship **GT 811e** (\$2,999), with East Indian rosewood back and sides, and the all-koa **GT K21e** (\$4,699). Taylor also unveiled the ultra-deluxe **PS14ce Honduran Rosewood** (\$9,999), with back and sides made from that lush-sounding tonewood, along with a sinker redwood top, and an ornate California Vine inlay pattern on the fretboard, headstock,



and bridge. (The guitar is also available in a 12-fret version.) At the other end of the price spectrum, the new **AD22e** (\$1,599) features a mahogany top and sapele back and sides, all solid, in a Grand Concert platform.

Last year also saw the introduction of a smart new device of interest to all acoustic-electric Taylor owners: the **TaylorSense Guitar Health Monitoring System** (\$79.99), measuring temperature, humidity, and physical impacts. The system consists of a sensor box that fits into the 9-volt battery compartment on most Taylor guitars, which interfaces with the TaylorSense app on Apple and Android devices. (See a review of the TaylorSense, along with the **GTe Urban Ash** [\$1,599], on page 72.)

AFFORDABLE OPTIONS

While Breedlove freshened up its U.S.-made Premier Series (from \$2,399) with L.R. Baggs EAS VTC electronics, the innovative company also unveiled its Eco Collection (guitars from \$399) of solid-topped instruments made from sustainably harvested tonewoods. Emile

Menasché checked out the top-of-the-line **Pursuit Exotic S Concert Edgeburst CE** (\$1,299) and was notably impressed by its warm voice and excellent projection (see review on page 74).

Also designed with sustainability in mind, Córdoba's spruce-and-mahogany **Protégé C1 Matiz** (\$249) is available in four bold colors, each with a matching gig bag made from recycled nylon. This model offers an affordable entry point for the new student or the steel-string player looking to branch out to the nylon-string, as does Córdoba's **Fusion 5** (from \$429), which Nick Millevoi found helped him sound convincingly like a classical guitarist and also summon his inner Chet Atkins.

While once known for its no-frills budget models, in recent years Cort has been steadily producing affordable instruments that look less like student models than boutique guitars. A good case in point is the **Gold-Edge** (\$1,499), with its rich appointments, beveled armrest and cutaway, and L.R. Baggs Anthem electronics, a "classy, distinguished model with a warm, rich

low end and midrange and a bold sound," according to Kate Koenig.

As an affordable alternative to U.S.-made classics, Epiphone introduced the Inspired by Gibson collection, consisting of non-cutaway and cutaway J-45 models, a J-200, and standard six- and 12-string Hummingbirds. James Volpe Rotondi checked out the iconic six-string **Hummingbird** version (\$799), with its avian-themed pickguard, and found it to be great-sounding and inspiring to play, writing a handful of tunes in the days after he received the guitar.

Guild introduced a trio of new jumbo guitars with built-in Fishman electronics. A standard six-string, the **F-240E** (\$399) sports a solid spruce top and mahogany back and sides, as does the **B-240E Baritone** (\$499). Meanwhile, the **BT-258E** (\$629) is an eight-string baritone with two octave courses and rosewood back and sides. Greg Lowell was particularly taken with the unique instrument's clarity and massive headroom. Toward the end of the year, Guild unveiled the **A-20 Marley** (\$399), which replicates Bob Marley's songwriting partner, an old



Top row (L-R): MusicNomad KISS setup kit, Boss Acoustic Singer Live LT, Fishman PowerTap Infinity, Mojotone Quiet Coil NC-1
Bottom row: Bose L1 Pro, Augustine strings, Fender Acoustic Preverb and Smolder OD, L.R. Baggs Voiceprint DI

Guild Madeira. Keep an eye out for a review of this neat guitar in an upcoming issue.

HEIRLOOM-QUALITY BEAUTIES

At a glance, the new **Collings CJ-45 Traditional** (from \$6,400) looks very similar to the slope-shouldered CJ-35 that has been in the Austin-based guitar maker's catalog for years. But the CJ-45 T—one of only two new acoustic models (unless you count the reissued C100) unveiled since the luthier Bill Collings' passing, in 2017—is quite a different animal. It's built with an entirely new bracing pattern, the result of countless hours of R&D and retooling, and is designed to capture the dry growl of the best 1940s examples, while having superior build quality and playability. Greg Olwell praised the CJ-45 T's warmth and power, and its "singularly satisfying sound."

The Santa Cruz Guitar Company seldom releases new models, so it was a big deal when SCGC introduced the **Happy Traum Signature Model HT/13** (\$8,800 as reviewed in the November/December 2021 issue). Sean

McGowan checked out this 13-fret beauty, with its old-growth redwood top, Honduran mahogany back and sides, and opulent 41-style appointments—the perfect tribute to the beloved roots musician and educator. McGowan, a jazz guitarist with demanding tastes in instruments, was wowed by the HT/13's sonic and physical beauty.

STRINGS AND SETUP TOOLS

For acoustic guitarists, the biggest news from stalwart strings and accessories manufacturer D'Addario was the introduction of the **XS** series of strings (from \$17.99), with their hyper-thin coating, designed for longevity and strength. Phosphor bronze XS sets are now available for six- and 12-string guitars (as well as mandolins) in all of the typical gauges. I tried a 12–53 set on a Waterloo WL-S and was as impressed by the strings' sound and feel as their handsome new packaging.

Augustine, the nylon-string pioneer, still makes the same sets it built its reputation on decades ago. But for 2021, the company

freshened up its packaging with bright new colors, designed not just to be attractive but to help easily distinguish the different sets. Mark Small auditioned a pair of Augustine sets—the **Imperial** and the **Regal** (both \$9.99) and was impressed by the ways in which they enlivened his cedar- and spruce-topped classical guitars.

In one of the year's more curious product launches, the cleaning, care, and maintenance company MusicNomad introduced the **Keep It Simple, Setup (KISS)** kit (\$159.99)—a package containing all of the tools needed for adjusting an acoustic guitar, so many wrenches and screwdrivers and such, plus a booklet explaining exactly how to use them. Kate Koenig, admitting to having had only a little experience setting up her guitars, found that the KISS kit gave her the confidence to successfully adjust an old Tacoma dreadnought.

GEARING UP TO BE HEARD

While the possibility of live music seemed bleak for much of 2020, gigs did begin to



return for many musicians in 2021 as some coronavirus restrictions were lifted. Acoustic guitarists who had been playing unplugged for many months then needed to gear up with sound reinforcement.

Throughout the year, AG checked out a range of products for being heard. Fishman offered a series of systems combining transducers with body systems, to capture the information that pickups alone tend to miss. Emile Menasché reviewed a humbucker soundhole version, the **PowerTap Earth**, as well as the undersaddle **PowerTap Infinity** (each \$299.95), praising both their great sound, flexibility, and potential for creativity.

For another soundhole solution, Doug Young auditioned the **Mojotone Quiet Coil NC-1** (\$189.95), a single-coil unit that, as the name suggests, avoids the unwanted humming associated with this pickup type. Young found that the Mojotone sounds far more natural, balanced, and acoustic-like than the typical soundhole pickup, also admiring its lightness and ease of installation.

If you have a pickup, then you'll obviously need an amp or PA system. We checked out some solutions good for a range of applications. The **Boss Acoustic Singer Live LT** (\$399.99) is a small 60-watt package boasting plenty of audio flexibility—James Rotondi found it to be a great companion for the singer-songwriter, perfect for the woodshed or small venue. Bose updated its L1 Pro series of compact PA systems with several different versions: the **L1 Pro8** (\$1,199), **Pro16** (\$1,799), and **Pro32** (\$2,698–\$3,098). Doug Young put the **L1 Pro16** through its paces and admired the system's abundant power and clear, evenly dispersed sound.

As for effects pedals, the year saw some excellent offerings tailored specifically for the acoustic guitarist. After introducing the **Crush Acoustic 30** amplifier, the British amp company Orange followed up with the **Orange Crush Acoustic** pedal (\$169). Nick Millevoi tried this class-A preamp and appreciated its transparent EQ options and its groovy design. Millevoi also auditioned a pair of Fender stompboxes—the **Acoustic Preverb** and the **Smolder Acoustic**

OD (\$149.99)—and, while noting their staid appearance, he did appreciate their utility and potential for sonic exploration.

In an entirely different direction, L.R. Baggs' **Voiceprint DI** (\$399) is a preamp/direct input that uses digital signal processing based on impulse response (IR). To put it plainly, this allows you to take an aural snapshot of the natural sound of your acoustic guitar, and then use that image in conjunction with a pickup so that your guitar sounds more natural when plugged in. The Voiceprint DI is the first product of its type that can use a smartphone for creating IRs and for accessing the hardware's advanced features. Doug Young was amazed that he could use his Apple Watch to work the Voiceprint DI, and he praised the way the system could not just capture natural acoustic guitar tone but remove problematic frequencies.

Stay tuned throughout the year for AG's take on other electronic innovations like these, guitars both boutique and budget, and much more—all the tools that will help you play and sound your very best. **AG**

HERE'S HOW



UNSPASH

Finding Joy

A simple but effective plan for greater enjoyment and productivity in the woodshed

BY JUDY MINOT

Most musicians have had the experience of going through a practicing slump—a time when they knew they should be hitting the woodshed but found themselves avoiding it by procrastinating. Why does this happen? You may feel overwhelmed: There are just too many things you could work on, musically, and you don't know where to start or what to do. It may be that when you do find time to practice, you can't summon the energy. Or you may feel stuck in a rut, just spinning your wheels and not making progress. It's time to get back in touch with that love/hunger/yearning that made you want to play guitar in the first place.

One of the reasons we often lose enthusiasm for practicing is that as we get more accomplished, daily improvements in our playing become more subtle. The fact that you don't always see daily progress actually goes hand in hand with becoming a better guitarist. And the

problem is that when you can't tell you're improving, practicing quickly loses its allure.

This article details how you can set yourself up to illuminate your progress as you make it—and have more fun as you do it. Before you start, remind yourself what initially made you choose the guitar. What has inspired you since then? It might be a style of music, a particular artist, or the sound of the instrument. Maybe you found it a practical way to accompany yourself or others. Keep those things in mind as you work through the steps below.

1 SET A CLEAR AND ACHIEVABLE PRACTICE GOAL

Take a minute and think about something you want to get out of your playing, jotting down a few notes if that helps. Choose something you think you could make progress on in about six weeks. If you're feeling overwhelmed, just doing this step can quickly

clear a way forward. Knowing exactly what you're aiming for will help you focus as you practice, play, and even listen to music.

For now, stick with just one goal. It might be playing up the neck, integrating a new scale into your breaks, improving your flatpicking skills, playing in DADGAD tuning, learning a backup pattern for jigs, getting more relaxed with singing and playing, knowing the I, IV, and V chords in three new keys, etc.

Try to distinguish between achieving a practice goal and learning a new tune or song. Think of songs or tunes—whether Django Reinhardt's "Minor Swing," Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues," or Kaki King's "Gobi"—as the tools you use to accomplish your practice goals.

2 MEASURE YOUR PROGRESS

Get a notepad or digital device and write down your goal, today's date, and an end date. Every time you practice, spend a



few minutes working on your goal. You can spend five minutes, ten, or 20—it's up to you. More than that is fine, but don't get too stressed out about spending a lot of time. The most important things are to be consistent and to write down what you did.

Make your notes brief: "D and A chords in three positions"; "Accuracy! Top four strings only!"; "Gm, Bm, Cm blues scales—practice (5 mins), blues improv over looped backing track—70 bpm." The next time you pull out the guitar you can quickly pick up where you left off. Run through those minor blues scales again, spend a little more time on the stickiest one and maybe add a new one. Push the metronome up a couple of clicks. Feeling OK with DADGAD in one tune? Move on to another.

When you can, give yourself a pat on the back. Write it down! "Flatpicking: 'Soldier's Joy' 90 bpm!!!" Highlight it, underline it, draw a

As we get more accomplished, daily improvements in our playing become more subtle.

star, whatever. Give your brain a reason to remember your milestones. Daily notes will help remind you that you're moving forward. You can even flip back through your notes occasionally to see what you've been working on. That may inspire you to revisit something, or just give you a mental boost.

3 MAKE IT FUN

Watch for signs that practicing is becoming a chore. As soon as you start to feel that way, take action. You may want to make your daily goals less ambitious. Cut out something entirely if it's not inspiring you today. For me, the first thing to go is technical exercises. Some days I love them, but definitely not always.

Try going slower. When you slow down enough that you can actually play what you're working on, frustrations melt away. Dial down the metronome or backing track; tap your foot more slowly. Try to ignore the fact that you're playing at only 57 percent of Doc Watson's speed. It's OK, really.

If you feel physically and emotionally drained when you're done, that's not going to help you get excited about playing next time. Try practicing for a shorter time or take more breaks. Set a timer. End your practice session with a feel-good tune that you play well.

4 ASSESS YOUR PROGRESS

When you get to the end date you wrote in your notebook, take a look back. Did you make more or less progress than you expected? What specifically helped you get there? What worked and what didn't? Is there anything else you might like to try?

The purpose of your assessment is to help you do even better next time. Try not to get hung up in negative self-evaluation. Instead, congratulate yourself on the fact that you stuck with the program for six weeks, no matter how imperfectly. Now you have some

great choices to make: Do you want to move on to a new goal? Explore this one more deeply? Is six weeks a good length of time?

By working just a little more methodically, you can turn practicing into something you look forward to. Your time in the woodshed can rejuvenate you, fill you with energy, and make you want to go back and do it again tomorrow.

Judy Minot is the author of Best Practice: Inspiration and Ideas for Traditional Musicians. judyminot.com

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Holding Down the Harmony

What to do when things get tricky in a chord-melody arrangement

BY GREG RUBY

THE PROBLEM:

In playing chord-melody style, you aren't sure which chord to use when the melody isn't a chord tone or moves too quickly.

THE SOLUTION:

Hold down a triad while playing a chromatic or diatonic melody, using the classic song "My Melancholy Baby" for context.

1 HOLD DOWN THE HARMONY

Chromatic melodies typically connect two chord tones by playing the note or notes in between. In **Example 1**, the notes E (the third of a C major chord) and G (the fifth) are bridged by way of F and F#. When this occurs, choose a chord that requires as few fingers as possible. For instance, to play **Example 2**, hold down the C chord with a first-finger barre at fret 5, freeing up your other fingers to play the additional notes.

Example 3 demonstrates the same idea, but with a diatonic melody, rather than chromatic. Keeping the shape shown in the chord frame held throughout, use your fourth finger to play the tenth-fret notes. In **Example 4**, play the Dm9 chord as shown and then, with your second and third fingers held in place, move your first finger to grab the D on string 2, fret 3. [Alternatively, try barring the strings at the third fret, simply releasing your fourth finger to play the third-fret D. —Ed.] This technique requires careful repetition in order to develop the digital independence required for a smooth transition.

2 FOLLOW THE CHANGES AND USE INVERSIONS

When the melody comes to a rest but the chords continue, simply play the changes. If possible, use the same chord shape, but only sound the lower strings. **Example 5** demonstrates a four-note D9 chord with the second-string E as a melody note, followed by strumming strings 3–5 during the rest of the measure, providing a



COURTESY OF GREG RUBY

four-to-the-bar rhythm feel. When possible, continue to hold the melody note while strumming the chord.

As I have discussed in previous lessons, inversions are a keystone of chord-melody playing. In **Example 6**, move from a G9 (with the melody note A on string 1) up to the first-string C and then down to G7, the B melody note followed by another A. Using only your fourth finger on the first string will make an easier transition between each of the notes and inversions.

3 LET IT GO

Sometimes it works best to take the chord out of chord-melody playing. It's always an option to let go of a chord after strumming it and briefly let the melody carry the load. In **Example 7**, place the C6/9 chord on beat 1 to support the D melody note, then immediately let go of the chord and play only the notes C, D, and E. Not only does this make things easier on your fretting fingers, it gives the ear a welcome change of texture.

4 PLAY "MY MELANCHOLY BABY"

Now tie the above concepts together in a chord-melody arrangement of "My Melancholy

Baby" (**Example 8**), a well-loved standard that has been recorded by many jazz greats—guitarist Django Reinhardt and pianists Bill Evans and Thelonious Monk to name just a few. The arrangement opens with the ideas introduced in the first two examples, and the technique of strumming the lower part of a chord is used first in measures 3–4 and then in 6–8.

Be sure to isolate any tricky areas throughout, and really focus on your fretting fingers. In measure 17, for instance, release the F chord when you move your first finger down to play the fourth-fret G#. Try keeping the shape of the chord to allow a quick landing back to it on beat 3.

When working through the arrangement, repeat each phrase slowly, being mindful of the melody notes and chord tones. Once you get the hang of the rhythm guitar strumming as part of the arrangement, try making your strums a little quieter in dynamics than the melody. Happy practicing!

Greg Ruby is a guitarist, composer, historian, and teacher specializing in jazz from the first half of the 20th century. His latest book is The Oscar Alemán Play-Along Songbook Vol. 1. Ruby teaches Zoom lessons and classes. For more information, visit gregrubymusic.com.

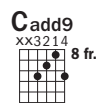
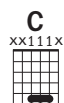


Example 1

Example 2

Example 3

Example 4



Musical notation for Examples 1-4. Example 1: Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass clef, 5, 6, 7, 8. Example 2: Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass clef, 5, 6, 7, 8. Example 3: Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass clef, 10, 8, 10, 8. Example 4: Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass clef, 5, 3, 5.

Example 5

Example 6

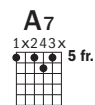
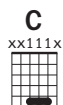
Example 7



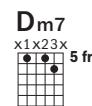
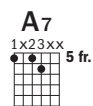
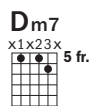
Musical notation for Examples 5-7. Example 5: Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass clef, 5, 5, 5, 5. Example 6: Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass clef, 5, 8, 7, 5. Example 7: Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass clef, 3, 5, 4, 5.

Example 8

"My Melancholy Baby"



Musical notation for Example 8. Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass clef, 5, 6, 7, 8. Example 8: Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass clef, 10, 8, 8, 7. Example 8: Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass clef, 6, 6, 6, 6. Example 8: Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass clef, 5, 6, 6, 6.



To Coda

Musical notation for Example 8. Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass clef, 5, 3, 2, 3. Example 8: Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass clef, 6, 5, 6, 6. Example 8: Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass clef, 5, 6, 6, 6. Example 8: Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass clef, 5, 5, 5, 5.

9

G7 xx121x
G9 xx1214
G7 xx1324 3 fr.
D9 xx134x
G7 1x243x

4 fr.

4 4 1 4

3 5 6 3 5 8 7 5 5 5 5 5 3 4 4 4 3 3 3 3

4 4 3 5 4 7 5 5 4 4 5 4 3 4 3 4 3

3 3 3 3

13

C⁶ x2113x
D7 x3241x
G7 xx1211
1x243x

D.C. al Coda

3 5 4 5 3 5 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3

2 5 4 5 5 3 5 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3

3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3

⊕ **Coda**

F xx3121 5 fr.
F^{dim}7 xx1213 7 fr.
B7 xx1211 7 fr.
F^{dim}7 xx1213 7 fr.
C6 2x143x 7 fr.

5 4 5 7 8 7 7 7 5 8 7 8 9

6 6 6 6 7 7 7 7 4 9 9 9

5 5 5 5 8 8 8 8 5 7 7 7

7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 4 8 8 8

20

A7 xx1211 5 fr.
Dm7 x13121 5 fr.
G13 xx1231
C6 x4231x

5 5 5 5 6 8 9 5 5 3 5 3 1 2 2 3

5 5 5 5 5 6 6 6 5 4 4 4 2 2 2 3

5 5 5 5 7 7 7 7 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3

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BRENDAN HOLLIS

Men of Harlech

Learn Welsh fingerstyle techniques and a traditional march arranged for guitar

BY LUKE EDWARDS

Wales is home to a fascinating and ancient heritage of music, dating back to the bardic tradition of the sixth century. The influences feeding into the Welsh tradition are diverse and intriguing. Heavily featuring harp music, fiddle tunes, and vocal ensembles, the general ethos of the music is far less doom and gloom than that of its more well-known Celtic cousins, Scotland and Ireland.

While the guitar is a relatively alien instrument to traditional Welsh music, I believe it has fantastic potential to explore this ancient music in exciting new ways. In this lesson, we will explore some of the common techniques and ornaments associated with the style, and show how they can be used to great effect in your playing. The piece culminates with a fingerstyle arrangement of a classic Welsh march, “Men of Harlech,” that’s packed with Celtic technique and ornamentation.

CHORALE HARMONY AND PICKING-HAND DYNAMICS

Wales is known as the land of song, and one of its greatest cultural exports is large male choirs. Virtually every town and valley has its own local ensemble, and some of the traditional repertoire in this style is nothing short of stunning. Customarily led by a pipe organ, and often featuring great numbers of singers, the resulting sound is a rich and dense wall of harmony unlike any other.

In a similar manner to religious hymns, the harmony is often parallel and monophonic, rich with cadences and detail. Achieving this enormous sound on just six guitar strings is no easy feat. However, with the correct right-hand dynamic and timbral control, the guitar is capable of a surprisingly effective approximation.

Example 1 shows the chords in the key of C major played as block voicings. The aim of this

exercise is to smoothly change between the written chords, while trying to emphasize the highest pitched note of each chord. A simple way to do this is to bring the finger that is picking the accented note higher up into your hand—sometimes even to the point of touching your palm. This will naturally impart more energy into the string and give that note a volume boost.

Practice the shapes as written, and once you are comfortable with them, play through the exercise first accenting the highest note, then again accenting the middle note, and finally once more accenting the bass note. This technique of playing block chordal harmony while making the melody stand out is used extensively in “Men of Harlech.”

Another good exercise to help refine this technique—and to improve your playing and fretboard knowledge in general—is to apply the same techniques to your major scale in



double-stops. **Examples 2a** and **2b** demonstrate the C major scale harmonized in two intervals common to Welsh music, sixths and tenths, respectively.

Example 3 approaches the same idea of accenting individual notes. This time the accented notes are within a repeated arpeggiated picking pattern, rather than block chords.

The exercise repeats a picking pattern over a C major chord, but each repetition accents a different note. This same idea can then be repeated with any other picking pattern you like, so feel free to experiment.

An idea to take this even further: Practice the same exercises again with varying picking-hand placement. The closer that hand plays to the neck (*sul tasto*), the warmer the tone; the closer to the bridge (*sul ponticello*), the brighter the sound. Through proper application of timbral and dynamic control, you can achieve a much greater sense of depth in your playing and can accentuate certain melodies and parts of a piece at will.

CUTS AND TAPS

Much like its Irish and Scottish counterparts, Welsh music is rich with ornamentation. Fiddle tunes such as reels, jigs, hornpipes, and songs from the Dawnsio (Welsh dance) tradition are especially good examples of this. Two of the most common and effective fretting-hand ornaments are cuts and taps—incredibly brief grace notes intended to give a melody more character.

Quite often, the way a cut or tap will be implemented is by playing a different note than the intended melody note, before instantly either pulling off or hammering on to the principal note. A staple of the genre, this technique can be extensively heard on Celtic instruments like the Irish low whistle or the uilleann pipes.

A cut is generally played one scale tone higher than the principal note before being quickly pulled off to the lower destination note, and a tap is the opposite, played lower than the principal note and quickly being hammered on. Familiarize yourself with these ornaments by playing **Examples 4a** and **4b**, making sure to add an appropriate amount of vigor and speed to ensure no volume is lost and no rhythmical value is unnecessarily added to the grace note.

I have included bass notes for these examples, both to make the exercise more musical and to highlight a common misconception when reading grace notes. Although the grace note for either the cuts or taps appears before the bass note on the score, in reality, they occur on the same beat. Therefore, the grace note and bass note should sound at the same

time before the grace note is quickly cut or tapped to its principal note afterwards.

HARP-LIKE EFFECTS

Another technique I am very fond of implementing in my arrangements of Welsh music is natural harmonics. This is a popular technique for the harp (the national instrument of Wales), and I also feel that it helps achieve a harp-like quality on the guitar. It's not always possible to play an entire musical phrase using only the natural harmonics on the guitar, but when you are able to do so it can be a very effective method of restating the melody in a different way and getting more mileage out of your arrangements. This is especially important in Welsh and Celtic music, where the A and B sections combined often total only 16 bars, so many arrangement techniques are necessary to produce a performance-length arrangement.

While the guitar is a relatively alien instrument to traditional Welsh music, I believe it has fantastic potential to explore this ancient music in exciting new ways.

In **Example 5** I have written out the melody of the very famous and beautiful Welsh song “Calon Lân” (“Pure Heart”) using only natural harmonics. If you are new to this technique it may take some patience to get the harmonics to sound clearly. Natural harmonics are most commonly played at frets 12, 7, and 5, but in this arrangement I've also used those found at the ninth fret. Focus on accuracy of finger placement and picking closer to the bridge—the payoff in sound is well worth the effort! I would also recommend paying close attention to the suggested fingering I have written for the fretting hand, as this will make getting between the different harmonics easier. (Note that while I use my second finger on certain notes, feel free to use your third finger instead if that's more comfortable.)

Another gorgeous solution for replicating the sound of the harp, campanella (“little bell”) technique requires finding melody notes on multiple strings to allow several notes to ring out at the same time. Again, like the use of natural harmonics, this is a great arrangement

technique to create variation on a melody. It can often be a little challenging to locate the right notes within reach, and it's not always entirely feasible, but if you get it right the resulting sound is enchanting.

A great way to work on campanella technique is through scale practice. In **Example 6**, I have written out a G major scale both ascending and descending. Pay close attention to the fingerings, as due to the stretches there is only one manageable way to play it. Take the exercise slowly and try your best to sustain every note as long as possible. With careful practice you will be able to play this scale at great speed—often faster than in the traditional manner, as the notes are already prepared in advance on the adjacent strings. Try working out other scales and melodies in campanella style for yourself and you can become very proficient at it with a little practice.

MEN OF HARLECH

Written in 1794, “Men of Harlech” (**Example 7**) depicts the seven-year siege of 1461 at Harlech castle. This stands as the longest known military assault in the history of the British Isles. This piece has featured prominently in Welsh culture through films such as 1964's *Zulu* and 1941's *How Green Was My Valley*. It is immensely popular as a patriotic song, often heard at rugby matches and at any other gathering of the Welsh, and is still used to this day as a regimental march for the Welsh Guards.

Throughout this arrangement, I have packed in every technique discussed earlier in the lesson to give you a chance to practice them in context. The piece begins with the use of chorale harmony in bars 1–4; examples of cuts and taps can be found most prominently in bars 17–20; and campanella technique makes an appearance in bar 27. There is also ample opportunity to make use of the picking-hand dynamic techniques mentioned in examples 1–3. A simple way to do this is to accent any up-stemmed note in the notation. I encourage you to experiment with volume and timbral changes throughout the song by altering your right-hand placement and intensity. This can add a tremendous amount of depth and character to your performance.

I hope that you enjoy learning this joyful Welsh tune, and that it inspires you to delve deeper into the spectacular repertoire and heritage of Wales.

Luke Edwards, the author of Songs of Wales for Fingerstyle Guitar (Mel Bay Publications), is a contemporary guitarist and educator based in Cardiff, Wales. Edwards teaches guitar internationally via Skype and Zoom. lukemusic.co.uk

Example 1

C D_m E_m F G A_m B_{dim} C

Example 2a
Diatonic sixthsExample 2b
Diatonic tenths

Example 3

C

Example 4a
CutsExample 4b
TapsExample 5
"Calon Lân"

harm. throughout

Example 6
Campanella technique

let ring throughout

Example 7
"Men of Harlech"

C F G C G/B C D_m7 C G/B A_m7 G G7



C F G Am7 G/B C F C G C

2/3 CIII

C F C G/B C Dm Am/C G/B F/A G F G

C F C G/B C F C G C

G C

G/B C Dm G G7

25

F (#4) C Dm6 C G G/B G7 C F

30

Am7 G/B C F C G C

2/3 CIII

harm. -----

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Economic Growth

How to strengthen your picking skills through efficient patterns

BY RON JACKSON

Some of my favorite guitarists—whether acoustic or electric or both—have very different picking styles. Pat Metheny plays using quite a bit of legato technique, letting his fretting hand carry the heavy load. John McLaughlin and Al Di Meola, by contrast, articulate almost every note using alternate picking, while Les Paul and Barney Kessel were known for their sweep picking.

I personally prefer combining all of the above styles in an approach known as economy picking—a amalgamation of alternate and

sweep picking, along with legato technique. You can look at economy picking as the best of all worlds. In this Weekly Workout, you'll work on the basics of alternate and sweep picking, as well as legato techniques for your fretting fingers. You'll then combine these approaches to take your picking to a higher level.

WEEK ONE

This week I'll introduce some rudimentary picking exercises, which can also serve as great warmups. I suggest using a metronome, starting at a slow tempo and gradually building up speed. The first few examples are based on an open C chord, so be sure to hold down that shape throughout while you concentrate on your picking hand.

Examples 1a–b are designed to get you accustomed to alternate picking—downstrokes (remember, toward the floor) followed by upstrokes (toward the ceiling). As you play

through these figures, try to keep your wrist relaxed and pick as close to the strings as possible, while picking all of the notes evenly.

It's a little more difficult to alternate pick consecutive notes on adjacent strings, as shown in **Example 2a**. This is where sweep picking—using a single downstroke or upstroke to play across two or more strings—comes in handy. **Example 2b** shows just how efficient sweep picking can be. You can play the C chord in just two strokes: Use a downstroke from strings 5–1 and then an upstroke from strings 2–4. After

Beginners' Tip #1

Experiment with a variety of picks in different materials, sizes, and thicknesses to find the one that works best for you.

Beginners' Tip #2

Though picking approaches can vary widely between players, try angling your pick about 45 degrees, and playing straight on the string.

**WEEK 1****Example 1a****Example 1b**

Example 1a and 1b are guitar exercises in 4/4 time. Example 1a consists of two measures of eighth-note patterns. Example 1b consists of two measures of eighth-note patterns. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The bass line is indicated by numbers 1-5 on a five-line staff.

Example 2a**Example 2b****Example 3**

Example 2a, 2b, and 3 are guitar exercises in 4/4 time. Example 2a and 2b consist of two measures of eighth-note patterns. Example 3 consists of two measures of eighth-note patterns. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The bass line is indicated by numbers 1-5 on a five-line staff.

Example 4a**Example 4b**

Example 4a and 4b are guitar exercises in 4/4 time. Example 4a consists of two measures of eighth-note patterns. Example 4b consists of two measures of eighth-note patterns. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The bass line is indicated by numbers 1-5 on a five-line staff.

WEEK 2**Example 5****Example 6**

Example 5 and 6 are guitar exercises in 4/4 time. Example 5 consists of two measures of eighth-note patterns. Example 6 consists of two measures of eighth-note patterns. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The bass line is indicated by numbers 1-5 on a five-line staff.

Example 7**Example 8**

Example 7 and 8 are guitar exercises in 4/4 time. Example 7 consists of two measures of eighth-note patterns. Example 8 consists of two measures of eighth-note patterns. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The bass line is indicated by numbers 1-5 on a five-line staff.

WEEKLY WORKOUT

picking each note, try resting your plectrum on the adjacent string, so that you're ready to play the next note immediately—great practice for building speed! Try using the same approach to play **Example 3**, but with three-string sweeps in eighth-note triplets.

The focus shifts to the fretting fingers for the next pair of exercises, involving slurs. **Example 4a** features some chromatic hammer-ons, while **Example 4b** incorporates pull-offs. Use downstrokes throughout, and play as smoothly and evenly as possible, with the slurred notes sounding at equal volume with those that are picked. For an added workout, try practicing these examples up the neck and on other strings as well.

WEEK TWO

This week you'll be working towards economy picking the G Mixolydian mode (G A B C D E F) in one octave. Begin with alternate picking, as shown in **Example 5**. For an added workout, try switching the order of the pick strokes, starting on an upstroke. Next, play the scale mostly in downstrokes, bringing hammer-ons and pull-offs into the mix (**Example 6**).

Move on to sweep picking across two adjacent strings, as notated in **Example 7**. Remember to angle your pick slightly for the sweeps,

which will make them a little easier to play. End the week with **Example 8**, featuring economy picking. Practice these figures until you can play them with ease, and if you like, transpose them to other modes or scales as well.

WEEK THREE

This week you'll explore picking approaches on the A minor pentatonic scale (A C D E G). I chose this scale because it's so common in

Remember to angle your pick slightly for the sweeps, which will make them a little easier to play.

guitar music as the basis of many blues and rock tunes, and because it really lends itself to economy picking. Begin by playing the scale in fifth position, starting with strict alternate picking (**Example 9**).

Once you have a firm grasp on the A minor pentatonic scale in both hands, try playing it with hammer-ons and pull-offs, using only downstrokes, as depicted in **Example 10**. Note how the two-notes-per-string configuration makes it feel natural to add these slurs. To play the scale with sweep picking, it's best to shift to second position, then to fifth (**Example 11**).

This week's last exercise, **Example 12**, involves economy picking in four-note groups. Note where you sweep on adjacent strings—like between 4 and 3 on beat 1, and 3 and 2 on the “and” of 1—and use slurs where possible, like beats 2 and 4 of bar 1, etc. For an added challenge, transpose these exercises higher up the neck; for instance, moving each note up three frets for the C minor pentatonic scale (C E \flat –F–G–B \flat).

WEEK FOUR

While the previous exercises have been largely scalar, this week you'll focus on a jazzy line based on a I–VI–ii–V (Fmaj7–D7 \flat 9–Gm9–C7 \flat 9) progression in the key of F major, with lots of arpeggios and chromatic notes to keep you on your toes. **Example 13** shows the lick with alternate picking. Work through it a few times to get it under your fingers and in your ears. Because of arpeggios like the Fmaj7 in the first measure, it's very efficient to play the lick using sweep picking, as shown in **Example 14**. And by shifting some of the fret locations, you can add pull-offs and hammer-ons to ease the burden on your picking hand (**Example 15**). For maximum efficiency, end with **Example 16**, which combines all of the approaches in an economy picking exercise. **AG**

Beginners' Tip #3

Always remember to maintain an even volume between picked notes and those articulated with hammer-ons and pull-offs.

Beginners' Tip #4

For any given lick or piece, try different picking approaches and go with the one that allows you to play the most cleanly and expressively.

TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Here is an advanced jazz pattern based on a ii–V–I progression (Dm7–G7 \flat 9–Cmaj7) in the key of C major. The figure works well with economy picking and includes sweeps, hammer-ons, and pull-offs. As with any challenging passage, practice this one slowly at first, going for a clean and even attack, before playing it at a relatively brisk clip.



WEEK 3

Example 9

Example 9 is a musical exercise in 3/4 time. The treble staff shows a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The guitar-specific bass line includes fret numbers: 5-8, 5-7, 5-7, 5-8, 5-8, 5-7, 7-5, 7-5, 8-5, 5-8, 5-7, 5-7, 5-8, 5-8.

Example 10

Example 10 is a musical exercise in 3/4 time. The treble staff shows a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The guitar-specific bass line includes fret numbers: 5-8, 5-7, 5-7, 5-8, 5-8, 5-7, 7-5, 7-5, 8-5, 5-8, 5-7, 5-7, 5-8, 5-8.

Example 11

Example 11 is a musical exercise in 3/4 time. The treble staff shows a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The guitar-specific bass line includes fret numbers: 5-8, 5-7, 7-5, 7-5, 7-5, 8-5, 5-3, 5-2, 5-2, 5-3, 5-3, 5-8, 5-8, 5-7, 7-5, 7-5, 7-5, 8-5.

Example 12

Example 12 is a musical exercise in 4/4 time. The treble staff shows a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The guitar-specific bass line includes fret numbers: 7-5, 5-7, 5-7, 5-8, 7-5, 5-8, 5-5, 5-8, 8-5, 8-5, 5-8, 5-8, 7-5, 7-5, 5-7, 5-7, 7-5, 7-5.

WEEK 4

Example 13

Example 13 is a musical exercise in 4/4 time. The treble staff shows a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The guitar-specific bass line includes fret numbers: 5-5, 7-8, 7-8, 5-4, 5-7, 5-4, 6-5, 8-5, 6-5, 8-5, 6-5, 7-5, 8-5, 6-5, 8-7. Chord labels above the staff are Fmaj7, D7b9, Gm9, and C7b9.

Example 14

Example 14 is a musical exercise in 4/4 time. The treble staff shows a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The guitar-specific bass line includes fret numbers: 5-5, 7-8, 7-8, 5-4, 5-7, 5-4, 9-6, 5-8, 5-6, 5-3, 2-5, 3-5, 6-2, 5-3, 2-1, 3-2. Chord labels above the staff are Fmaj7, D7b9, Gm9, and C7b9.

Example 15

Example 15 musical notation. Chords: F maj7, D7 \flat 9, Gm9, C7 \flat 9. Includes guitar tablature below the staff.

Example 16

Example 16 musical notation. Chords: F maj7, D7 \flat 9, Gm9, C7 \flat 9. Includes guitar tablature below the staff.

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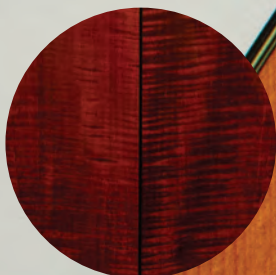
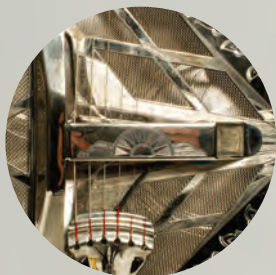
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Tangled Up in Blue

Bob Dylan's apparently unfinished masterpiece

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

Bob Dylan has been known to endlessly tweak his songs up through when he's recording them in the studio—and even after. "Tangled Up in Blue," first released on Dylan's 1975 album, *Blood on the Tracks*, is a song he can't seem to stop working on. As evidenced on various live versions, he has continued to retool the tune in concert for decades, adjusting not only the lyrics but the tempo, key, chord voicings, and other aspects.

The box set *The Bootleg Series, Vol. 14: More Blood, More Tracks* offers a glimpse into Dylan's idiosyncratic process, with eight different takes of "Tangled Up in Blue" aside from the original studio recording. The transcription here captures the intimate and intense first take—just Dylan and his guitar and harmonica, with support from bassist Tony Brown.

It's striking how dissimilar this rendition is from the full-band album version most listeners know and love. Some of the lyrics are switched from the first to the third person and there are many other differences: For instance, in the third verse, the location is Los Angeles, rather than New Orleans, and the gig is in an airplane plant rather than on a fishing boat; the words in the bulk of the sixth verse are completely different. (You can compare the lyrics in this transcription to that of the studio

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recording at bobb Dylan.com/songs.) As for the guitar accompaniment, the main acoustic on the album version plays mostly basic open shapes, all of them triadic. But on the first take Dylan plays in open E, using two- and three-finger shapes whose relationships to the open strings sometimes result in complex chords heard far more often in jazz than folk, like Emaj9/D# and B11.

Open-E tuning requires raising strings 4 and 5 a whole step from standard, and string 3 a half step. If you'd prefer not to put the extra tension on your guitar's neck, just tune to open D (D A D F# A D) and use a capo at the second fret to match the recording. Whichever option you choose, be sure to not just to play "Tangled Up in Blue," but also explore the harmonic and textural possibilities inherent to the open tuning. **AC**

TANGLED UP IN BLUE

WORDS AND MUSIC BY BOB DYLAN

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Intro/Harmonica Solo

♩ = 120



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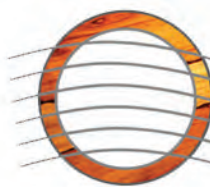
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Signed, David Luster, Publisher

TANGLED UP IN BLUE

Chord diagrams and guitar notation for the first three systems of the song.

System 1: E (xx0231 7 fr.), D/E (xx0231 5 fr.), E (x21000), Emaj9/D# (xx3100), A/c# (x20130).

System 2: F#m7 (2x0130), C#m (x20030), E (x21000), Emaj9/D# (xx3100), A/c# (x20130).

System 3: F#m7 (2x0130), Emaj7/B (x02130), B11 (x02130), E (000000).

Verse

Chord diagrams and guitar notation for the first line of the verse.

Chords: E (xx0231 7 fr.), D/E (xx0231 5 fr.), E (xx0231 7 fr.), D/E (xx0231 5 fr.).

1. Ear - ly one morn - in' the sun was shin - in'.
2. She was mar - ried when they first met,
- 3.-7. See additional lyrics
8. Harmonica solo

Chord diagrams and guitar notation for the second line of the verse.

Chords: E (xx0231 7 fr.), D/E (xx0231 5 fr.), E (x21000), Emaj9/D# (xx3100), A/c# (x20130).

won - drin' if she'd changed at all, if her hair was still red. And
helped her out of a jam, I guess, but he used a lit - tle too much force.

Chord diagrams and guitar notation for the third line of the verse.

Chords: E (xx0231 7 fr.), D/E (xx0231 5 fr.), E (xx0231 7 fr.), D/E (xx0231 5 fr.).

Her folks, they said their lives to - geth - er sure was gon - na be rough. They
they drove that car as far as they could, a - ban - doned it out West. And



E xx0231 7 fr. **D/E** xx0231 5 fr. **E** x21000 **E_{maj9/D#}** xx3100 **A/c#** x20130
 nev - er did like ____ Ma - ma's home - made dress; Pa - pa's bank - book was - n't big e - nough. ____ And
 split up on ____ a dark, sad night, both a - gree - ing it was best. ____ And

F#m7 2x0130 **C#m** x20030 **E** x21000 **E_{maj9/D#}** xx3100 **A/c#** x20130
 he was stand - in' on the side of the road, ____ rain ____ fall - in' on his shoes. ____
 she turned a round to look at him ____ as he was walk - in' a - way. ____ And

F#m7 2x0130 **C#m** x20030 **E** x21000 **E_{maj9/D#}** xx3100 **A/c#** x20130
 Head - in' out ____ for the old ____ East Coast, ____ Lord knows ____ he's paid some ____ dues ____ get - tin' through. ____
 she said, "This can't be ____ the end. We'll meet an - oth - er - day ____ on the a - ve - nue. ____

F#m7 2x0130 **E_{maj7/B}** x02130 **B11** x02130 **1.-7. E** 000000 **A/c#** x20130 **E** 000000 **8. E** 000000
 Tan - gled up in blue. ____

3. He had a job in the great north woods
 Working as a cook for a spell
 But he never did like it all that much
 And one day the axe just fell
 So he drifted down to L.A.
 Where he reckoned to try his luck
 Workin' for a while in an airplane plant
 Loading cargo on to a truck
 But all the while he was alone
 The past was close behind
 He'd seen a lot of women
 But she never escaped his mind
 And he just grew
 Tangled up in blue

4. She was workin' in a topless place
 And I stopped in for a beer
 I just kept lookin' at the side of her face
 In the spotlight so clear
 And later on as the crowd thinned out
 I's just about to do the same
 She was standing there in back of my chair
 Said to me, "What's your name?"
 I muttered somethin' underneath my breath
 She studied the lines on my face
 I must admit I felt a little uneasy
 When she bent down to tie the laces of my shoe
 Tangled up in blue

5. She lit a burner on the stove
 And offered me a pipe
 "I thought you'd never say hello," she said
 "You look like the silent type"
 Then she opened up a book of poems
 And offered it to me
 Written by an Italian poet
 From the 13th century
 And every one of them words rang true
 And glowed like burnin' coal
 Pourin' out of every page
 Like it was written in my soul
 From me to you
 Tangled up in blue

6. He was always in a hurry
 Too busy or too stoned
 And everything she ever did plan
 Just had to be postponed
 He thought they were successful
 She thought they were blessed
 With objects and material things
 But I never was impressed
 And when it all came crashing down
 I became withdrawn
 The only thing I knew how to do
 Was keep on keepin' on
 Like a bird that flew
 Tangled up in blue

7. So now I'm goin' back again
 Got to get to her somehow
 All the people we used to know
 They're an illusion to me now
 Some are mathematicians
 Some are doctors' wives
 Don't know how it all got started
 Don't know what they're doin' with their lives
 But me, I'm still on the road
 Headin' for another joint
 We always did feel the same
 We just saw it from a different point of view
 Tangled up in blue



Rebecca (L) and Megan Lovell



JOSH KRANICH

She's a Self Made Man

Larkin Poe's rocking declaration of independence

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

The title track of Larkin Poe's 2020 album *Self Made Man* is a blues rock banger, with crunchy electric guitar by Rebecca Lovell and scorching slide by Megan Lovell. The group revisited the song with orchestral backing from Nu Deco Ensemble on the new live release *Paint the Roses*. Now comes a third incarnation of the song—an acoustic duo take, recorded exclusively for AG, that is transcribed here.

As you can see in the accompanying video at AcousticGuitar.com/332, "She's a Self Made Man" also rocks on flattop guitar—Rebecca plays her Beard Deco Phonic Sidecar. Capo at the second fret to match the video's key.

During the verse, play all single notes in sync with the vocal melody, which is based on the E blues scale (E G A B \flat B D). Start each measure with the open sixth string—either a single quarter note or a pair of eighths. To dial in the swing feel, try counting the beats in triplets (one-and-a, two-and-a, three-and-a,

four-and-a), treating each pair of eighth notes like the first and third notes of the triplet.

Play the verse riff mostly between the fifth and seventh frets on the bottom three strings, and use palm muting to bring out the groove. Add slides throughout, as shown, and a bluesy quarter bend on the G (flatted third) in the first measure. As noted in the lyric/chord chart, for the song's intro and ending, use riffs derived from the verse.

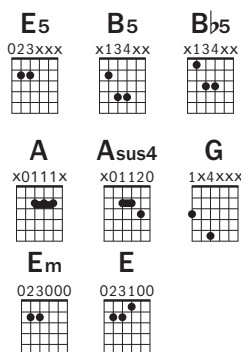
Only in the chorus do you move away from the tonic E chord or strum any chords at all. Summon your inner Pete Townshend at the end of the first bar of the chorus: play a quick 16th-note down-up strum on the B5, then hit the chord again on the downbeat of the next measure and let it ring. In the fourth measure, on the A, mute the strings and strum up with the pick to create a percussive snap. The chorus form expands the second and third times around, looping back through the B5-to-A move with different lyrics.

During the slide solo, Rebecca switches to mostly string percussion punctuated with occasional strums. Notice in the chord library that the G shape she uses is simply octave G notes. Whether on electric or acoustic, her rhythm parts are lean and mean.

As a bonus, we've included Megan's lap steel solo, adapted for standard guitar in open-G tuning. (Her lap steel tuning is G B D G B D, while open-G guitar is D G D G B D.) The notation is in the key of E, capo 2, to be consistent with the rhythm guitar part, but the capo is irrelevant here—the solo uses no open strings. (In other words, you could leave off the capo and play everything two frets higher than shown in the tab.) Play the whole solo with a slide, as Megan does, or try it fretted, using bends in place of some of the half-step slides.

If you tackle this song on slide, Megan suggests, "Pay special attention to pitch—it can get away from you pretty easily—and play with a hefty dose of attitude." **AG**

Chords, Capo II



Verse Riff

(♩ = $\frac{3}{4}$)

Verse Riff musical notation. Treble and bass staves. Key signature: two sharps (F# and C#). Time signature: 4/4. The riff consists of two measures, each repeated. The first measure has a treble staff with a quarter note G4, eighth notes A4 and B4, quarter note C#5, eighth notes B4 and A4, quarter note G4, and a triplet of eighth notes F#4, E4, and D4. The bass staff has a whole note chord E5 (0 0 5 7 7 5). The second measure has a treble staff with a quarter note G4, eighth notes A4 and B4, quarter note C#5, eighth notes B4 and A4, quarter note G4, and a triplet of eighth notes F#4, E4, and D4. The bass staff has a whole note chord E5 (0 5 7 7 5 7).

Chorus Riff

Chorus Riff musical notation. Treble and bass staves. Key signature: two sharps (F# and C#). Time signature: 4/4. The riff consists of two measures, each repeated. The first measure has a treble staff with a quarter note G4, eighth notes A4 and B4, quarter note C#5, eighth notes B4 and A4, quarter note G4, and a triplet of eighth notes F#4, E4, and D4. The bass staff has a whole note chord E5 (0 0 5 7 7 5). The second measure has a treble staff with a quarter note G4, eighth notes A4 and B4, quarter note C#5, eighth notes B4 and A4, quarter note G4, and a triplet of eighth notes F#4, E4, and D4. The bass staff has a whole note chord E5 (0 5 7 7 5 7).

Intro: verse riff from bars 4-5 (ignore repeat sign)

Chorus 1

Chorus 2

E5

1. I've been down and out, now I'm up again
When I roll the dice, everybody wins
Like a cannonball moving down the track
Baby's on her way, she ain't coming back
Never coming back, never coming back
Baby's on her way

E5

2. Shooting out the lights and the smoke alarms
Keep your fingers crossed, I'm a lucky charm
Like a cannonball moving down the track
Baby's on her way, she ain't coming back
Never coming back, never coming back
Baby's on her way
Never coming back, never coming back
Baby's on her way

B5 **Bb5** **A**

Like it or not, I don't give a damn
Lord, have mercy, I'm a self made man
E5
Whoa, self made man
Whoa, self made man

E5

3. I can't let it go, gotta do or die
For an underdog, I've been riding high
Gonna juice it up in my Pontiac
Baby's on her way, she ain't coming back
Never coming back, never coming back
Baby's on her way
Never coming back, never coming back
Baby's on her way

B5 **Bb5** **A** **Asus4** **Bb5**

Like it or not, I don't give a damn
Lord, have mercy, I'm a self made man
I've got a plan up top and two strong hands
A
Lord, have mercy, I'm a self made man
E5
Whoa, self made man

Solo

E5 **G** **E5** **G**
E5 **G** **Em** **E** **G**

Repeat chorus 2

End with verse riff bars 7-8 (sim.) to E chord

SHE'S A SELF MADE MAN

Solo

Tuning: D G D G B D, Capo II

($\text{♩} = \text{♩}^{3\text{rd}}$)

E5 **G**

E5

G **E5**

G **Em**

E **G**



Doc Watson

STATE ARCHIVES OF NORTH CAROLINA, RALEIGH, NC



Footprints in the Snow

Tackling masterly bluegrass solos by Doc Watson and Clarence White

BY ALAN BARNOSKY

The 1964 performance by Doc Watson and Clarence White together at the Newport Folk Festival is a stellar demonstration of flatpicking. As heard on a series of duets on the album *Treasures Untold*, the recording captures both players early in their careers. Watson emerged on the scene beginning in 1960 as part of the folk music revival, and White gained widespread notoriety in early 1964 with his creative leads on the Kentucky Colonels' *Appalachian Swing*.

The two guitarists had clearly distinctive styles: Watson applied old-time fiddle music to the guitar, resulting in a sound that was rhythmic, driving, and melodic. White, on the other hand, was influenced by guitarists (most notably including Watson, as well as Joe Maphis and Django Reinhardt) and therefore developed a sound that catered more to the steel-string and its unique voice instead of emulating the fiddle tradition. Even with such different approaches, Watson and White defined the sound of bluegrass guitar.

On *Treasures Untold*, the duo's playing is loose, creative, and joyful—though not intended as such, excellent material to be studied as an exemplar of flatpicking technique. The track “Footprints in the Snow” features the interplay of both guitarists' unique styles over a well-known favorite of the bluegrass repertoire.

To learn the piece, I would suggest first familiarizing yourself with the melody and the basic chord changes. The song follows a simple structure: a 16-bar verse alternating with a chorus of the same length. I've notated the melody to the verse and chorus as sung by Watson, which sits nicely in the open position when played on guitar.

Watson's 16-bar solo, taken on the verse's chord changes, is a perfect introduction to his improvisational approach. Typical of his style, he sticks close to the song's melody while also including impressive scalar runs, slides, and short bluesy passages. The consistent eighth- and quarter-note phrasing gives the solo momentum and rhythmic bounce, while also adding a bit of syncopation that keeps things

interesting. The solo is full of fun little licks that can quite easily be picked up and used elsewhere, like the G-triad (G B D) move in bar 38, followed by a cool ending phrase in bars 39–40.

Played on the chorus changes, White's solo begins as Watson's ends, in bar 48, and serves as a contrast to Watson's rhythmic chromatic style. White's approach is highly syncopated; it deviates from the melody and incorporates some colorful chord choices, like the substitution of a B \flat triad (B \flat D F) for a C7 chord in bars 58–59 and jazzy G7, G9, and C6 voicings in the last several measures.

There are other recordings of White playing this song (on *33 Acoustic Guitar Instrumentals* and *Muleskinner*), and while those versions are equally astounding, none of them are quite like this one. Watson's emphatic “Yeah, man!” during the solo makes it all the more fun to listen to. Modern flatpickers often blend White's approach with that of Watson's, but few can match the magic that was captured on this 1964 live recording.

AC

Verse

$\text{♩} = 110$

C **C7** **F** **G7**

1. Some folks like the sum-mer - time__ when they can stroll a - bout.___ Walk - ing through the
2. Now she's up in heav - en with the an - gel band.___ Some day I'm go - ing to

C **C7**

mead - ows green is pleas - ant__ no doubt.___ Just give me the win - ter - time when
join her in that hap - py land. Ev - 'ry - time the snow falls

F **G7** **C**

snow is on__ the ground,__ } for I found her when the snow was on__ the ground.___ I
brings back mem - o - ries,__ }

Chorus

C **G7**

traced__ her lit - tle foot - prints in__ the snow,__ in the snow. Found__ her lit - tle

C **C7**

foot - prints in__ the snow,__ Lord.___ Bless that a hap - py day__ when Nel - lie lost__ her

To Coda

F **G** **C**

way, for I found her when the snow__ was on__ the ground.___

3 0 2

Solo 1 (Doc Watson)

C **C7** **F** **G7**

3 2 3 0 2 0 1 0 3/5 3 3 5 5 4/5 0 4/5 3 1 2 1 2 0 2 1 0 0 0 0 2 0 2



38 **C** **C7**

43 **F** **G7** **C** *

*Upstemmed notes played
by Clarence White.

Solo 2 (Clarence White)

49 **C** **G7**

54 **C** **C7**

60 **F** **G7** **G9** **C6** **D.C. al Coda**

Coda **G** **C**

Beautiful Dreamer

Strumming through a classic by the “father of American music”

BY MAURICE TANI

“Beautiful Dreamer” was written by Stephen Foster (1826–1864)—often called the “father of American music”—at the end of his prolific career and published shortly after his untimely death. With its lilting rhythms and romantic lyrics, the song is one of America’s most beloved serenades.

Although “Beautiful Dreamer” was popular long before the advent of recording or radio, Bing Crosby had a huge hit with it 1940. The tune was revived again in the 1960s, a full century after it was written, with artists like the Searchers and Billy J. Kramer with the Dakotas attempting to update the song for the youth market with a rock ‘n’ roll sound.

“Beautiful Dreamer” was originally written with piano accompaniment in the key of E♭

major. Our arrangement transposes it to the more guitar-friendly key of C, with just a handful of chords, most of them open: C, Dm7, G, F, D7, and E. While most of these Campfire selections are in common (4/4) time, “Beautiful Dreamer” is in 9/8—that’s nine eighth notes per bar. Don’t feel intimidated if you’re not familiar with this meter. If you play along with the video, you’ll likely find that it’s easy enough to channel the waltz-like feel.

I like to play the song with a fairly active accompaniment part. As shown in the verse pattern notated below, I tend to play a bass note followed by two strums, occasionally adding a walk-up for a bit of spice, as in the last measure. While I like to change bass notes to keep things interesting, you could stick on the

same bass note for each chord—for instance, the third-fret C for the C chord and the open D for the Dm7 throughout.

For a two-bar intro, I use a figure based on the song’s melodic hook, built around the C, F, and G chord shapes, and I play variations on it in other parts of the song over the G chord. If it’s too difficult, feel free to omit it, but I would recommend working it up if you can, as it really makes the arrangement more engaging—and more fun to play—and that’s what it’s all about. **AG**



Maurice Tani

BEAUTIFUL DREAMER

WORDS AND MUSIC BY STEPHEN FOSTER, ARRANGED BY MAURICE TANI

Accompaniment Pattern

Chord diagrams for the accompaniment pattern:

- C**: x32010
- Dm7**: xx0211
- G**: 320004
- C**: x32010

The accompaniment pattern is shown in 9/8 time, featuring a bass line and a treble line. The bass line consists of a series of eighth notes, while the treble line features a series of eighth notes and rests. The pattern is repeated throughout the arrangement.

Chord diagrams for the verse:

- F**: T34211
- C**: x32010
- G**: 320004
- C**: x32010
- C**: x32010
- Dm7**: xx0211

The verse melody is shown in 9/8 time, featuring a series of eighth notes and rests. The lyrics are: Beau - ti - ful _ dream - er, wake un - to me. _ Beau - ti - ful _ dream - er, out on the sea. _



G 320004 **C** x32010 **Dm7** xx0211

5

Star - light and dew - drops are wait - ing for _ thee. Sounds of the rude world heard in the day, ____
Mer - maids are chant - ing the wild Lo - re - lei. O - ver the stream - let va - pors are borne, _

0 0 2 2 0 3 3 2 0 2 2 1 0 1 0 2 0 3 0 2

G 320004 **C** x32010 **G** 320004 **C** x32010

9

lulled by the moon - light have all passed a - way. Beau - ti - ful dream - er, queen of my song,
wait - ing to fade at the bright com - ing morn. Beau - ti - ful dream - er, beam on my heart,

0 0 2 2 0 3 3 2 0 3 0 2 2 0 2 3

D7 xx0213 **G** 320004 **C** x32010 **Dm7** xx0211

13

list while I woo thee with soft mel - o - dy. Gone are the cares of life's bus - y throng.)
e'en as the morn on the stream - let and sea. Then will all clouds of sor - row de - part.)

1 0 1 2 3 1 0 2 0 0 1 0 1 0 2 0 3 0 2

G 320004 **E** 023100 **F** T34211 **C** x32010 **G** 320004 **C** x32010

17

Beau - ti - ful dream - er, a - wake un - to me. Beau - ti - ful dream - er, a - wake un - to me.

0 0 2 2 0 3 3 2 0 2 2 0 1 1 0 2 3 2 0 3



MAKERS & SHAKERS

PHOTOS BY SCOTT MARY

Coats of Many Colors

Jeff Jewitt and his dual roles as a top finishing supplier and luthier

BY KATE KOENIG

Jeff Jewitt has always loved taking things apart. When he was a kid, he dismantled his father's lawnmower, eager to understand how it worked. (Unfortunately for his dad, he was unable to put it back together.) "That's kind of the way I'm wired," he says. "When I want to understand something, I go pretty deep into it."

This penchant for autodidacticism has served him well in his long professional life. Without any formal training in lutherie, Jewitt, now in his late 60s, has made a name for himself as a sought-after boutique guitar maker. But behind the scenes, he is as well known—if not more so—for his manufacturing business, Homestead Finishing Products, which provides colorants for many of the biggest names in the musical instrument industry and beyond. In fact, there's a good chance that the color on your favorite guitar may have come from one of his products.

TECHNICOLOR VISIONS

As a child growing up in Cleveland in the 1960s, Jewitt had a natural proclivity for science. Captivated by the Mercury and Apollo space programs, he dreamt of becoming an astronaut. Then, as he got older, he imagined himself becoming a chemist. Meanwhile, he got into the guitar during the height of the folk

era and immediately became obsessed. His interest in science never waned, but rather took a backseat when he was sent to prep school as a teenager and found himself gravitating towards the arts, later majoring in studio art at Kenyon College, in Gambier, Ohio.

In the time between his graduation from Kenyon and the launch of his furniture refinishing business, Jewitt got married, bought a house, and made it his mission to make a guitar—a task he now describes as his Everest conquest. He joined the Guild of American Luthiers, subscribed to the Stewart-MacDonald catalog, and then, after acquiring copies of David Russell Young's *The Steel String Guitar: Construction & Repair* and William Cumpiano and Jonathan Natelson's *Guitarmaking: Tradition and Technology*, built his first instrument in 1985.

At the time, Jewitt didn't see himself making a steady income from lutherie. So then, in 1988, he began refinishing furniture, a trade he learned from his father, who would refurbish antique pieces on weekends. He remained in that field until the early 1990s, when he had the crazy idea that he could make colorants for the music industry. It wasn't long before he realized that he needed a deeper understanding of chemistry to make it in the business, so he bought

some video courses in organic chemistry on VHS tapes and taught himself the subject.

Jewitt then set out to not only produce colorants but to invent a product that would remedy a perennial industry dilemma. At the time, a finisher needed one type of product for staining bare wood, another for making the spray color for a sunburst, and yet another for other tasks like touchups and coloring grain filler. Jewitt says, "I thought, 'Maybe I can just make a one-size-fits-all solution!'"

After a bit of trial and error, Jewitt eventually arrived at a successful formula, and in 1995 brought the finished product, TransTint, to Stewart-MacDonald, the luthier supplier, who bought the idea immediately. Today, Jewitt's concentrated dye-based colorant (sold as ColorTone under StewMac) is used by Gibson, Martin, Taylor, Collings, Breedlove, and Santa Cruz, among other major guitar companies, as well as hundreds and hundreds of small boutique makers. Homestead Finishing Products sells everything from finishes to polishes and waxes to HVLP (High Volume Low Pressure) spray equipment to stains and colorants, marketing both homemade products as well as distributing those made by other brands.

Jewitt is currently phasing out the majority of his products to focus exclusively on colorants.

Jeff Jewitt buffing the finish on a new build for the next *Acoustic Guitar* auction and working on the bracing for another guitar.



COURTESY OF JEFF JEWITT

Having less variety in his inventory means less time filling small orders, and more time for building guitars. In the meantime, the Trans-Tint/ColorTone product line has left an indelible mark on the industry. “Sherwin-Williams has told me that my yellow is different from anybody else’s on the market, and that’s the reason that they buy from me,” he says. “And I’ve been told that if I ever discontinue my red, I’ll have death threats from just about everybody that does Gibson repair work. It’s just a dead ringer for some of the old Gibson colors.”

Jewitt’s clients run the gamut—alongside those in instrument making (which also include Steinway & Sons, the piano company), he supplies manufacturers in furniture and flooring, as well as the film, aerospace, and automotive industries. His products have been used on the sets of the *Twilight Saga* series, *The Green Mile*, and other movies, and to decorate the interior of Sikorsky helicopters. In addition to his main business, he’s authored six books and six online courses on finishing and guitar making—enthusiastically endorsing the same self-taught method that led him to accomplish what he had so long believed to be impossible. He never envisioned achieving so much, but repeatedly brings everything back to his main philosophy that has helped him every step of the way: “If you can build a guitar, you can do anything,” he says.

A SELF-MADE MAKER

According to Jewitt, his successful colorant business has reached its apex. Now, he says, “I want

to just focus on the musical instrument business and maybe a few other things to pay the bills.” Fortunately, that success has enabled him to pursue his dream of making guitars, a part of the business he established around 2012, after having built on the side over the years. While he still makes all of his colorants by hand, he’s hired someone to fill all the orders, which allows him more time to build guitars during the week—something he balances with spending time problem-solving colorant issues.

Going back and forth between the Homestead Finishing and guitar shop areas of his 8,000-square-foot Cleveland facility can lead to some humorous scenarios—in which that self-taught organic chemistry education comes in handy. Jewitt says, “It can be a problem in that the raw materials that I use are very powdery. Sometimes I’ll get a bunch of dye powder stuck in my hair when I’m over there, and then I’ll go to wet down a soundboard and all of a sudden, I see little spots of turquoise and red and purple. But fortunately, I know how to get rid of them.”

Jewitt’s average output is six to eight guitars a year, most of them smaller sizes like 00s and 000s. He is currently working on a few commissions. One is for former Major League Baseball player Derek Dietrich, who requested that the guitar match the color of his signature bat. Upon inspecting the bat, Jewitt saw that it was manufactured by Victus Sports—a company that just so happens to be a Homestead Finishing customer. “That made life easy,” he says. “And I love commission

builds. That’s my favorite part—making somebody’s dream realized.”

His goal is to build guitars that sound as good as they look, and when it comes to gauging the quality of the materials and the product while it’s in the process of being built, Jewitt steers clear of modern technology such as frequency spectrum analyzers to measure a guitar’s tone. “I’m still more of the intuitive, old-school type of builder in that I’m just tapping the wood all the time as I’m building,” he says, laughing.

At the end of the day, Jewitt admits the quality of the product can depend on luck of the draw. He has carefully built instruments using the finest tonewoods—like sinker mahogany or Honduran rosewood and Italian spruce, assembled with hot hide glue—and been underwhelmed by the finished results. On the other hand, he’s experienced many of those special and unpredictable moments in lutherie when a finished guitar sounds brilliant, unlike any other. “It’s like, ‘Wow, how did that happen?’ You never know, quite frankly,” he says.

Despite having made it as the guitar industry’s leading colorant supplier and achieving his dream of becoming a luthier, Jewitt says that his favorite parts of the job are the endless creative avenues and the rewards of navigating them. “What I love about building acoustic guitars is that there’s always something different to do,” he says. “You go on social media or whatever and you see something that somebody else has done and you go, ‘Wow, that’s really cool, I want to incorporate that.’ You’re always upping your own game, and I just love that.”

AC

The Dark Arts of Instrument Repair

How a skilled tech can make dings and scratches disappear

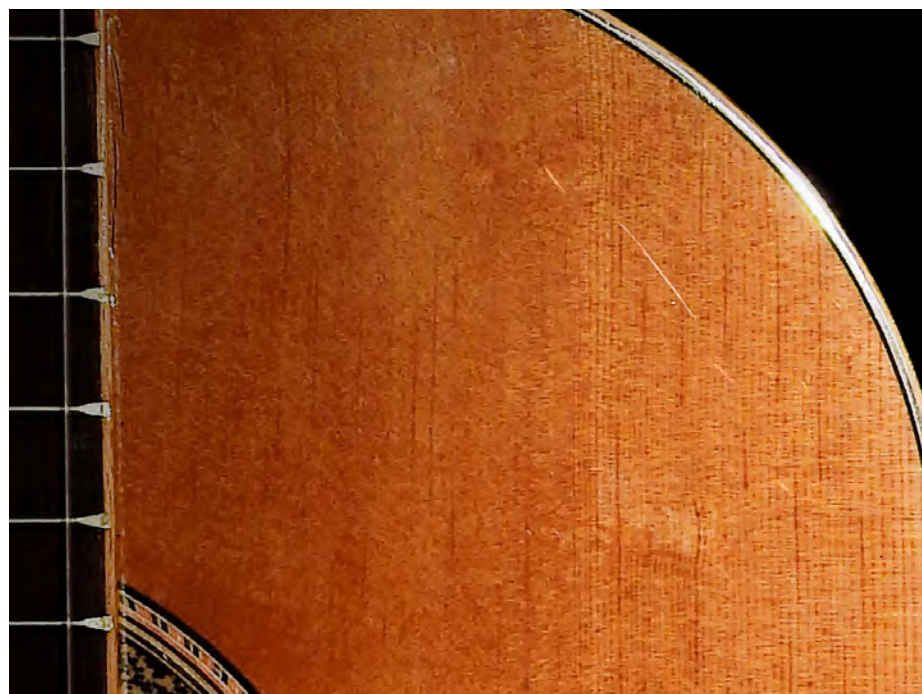
BY MARTIN KEITH

Q: *The top of my 1972 Martin D-18 recently got a good ding, about the size of a small pea; the finish is cracked and the spruce is depressed. Is there any way this can be repaired?*

—Richard Hannah, via email

A: Thanks for the question. Touchup is one of the real dark arts of instrument repair, and one that exists in an almost entirely different universe from structural and functional repairs. A good touchup person needs an understanding of both the mechanical and chemical properties of the finish, as well as foresight into how both the finish and the repair will age. Vintage finishes require very different techniques than modern ones, and a bad touchup can really spoil the effect of an otherwise competent repair job, as well as the resale/market value of the guitar. There are some really brilliant touchup artists in the field, and their work can sometimes appear to border on magic.

Surface damage mostly falls into a few general categories—dings/dents, scratches, and cracks. Sometimes, a particular piece of damage will be a combination of these. Dents are actual 3D impressions in the surface, usually caused by impact. These are most common in the soft wood of guitar tops, but can be easily found all over a well-loved guitar. In addition to crushing the cellular structure of the wood itself, a dent will either distort or fracture the film of finish that lies above it.



PXHERE PHOTO

Older finishes, such as shellac and nitrocellulose lacquer, are more likely to shatter, whereas newer polyester or polyurethane finishes are sometimes strong and flexible enough to follow the dent without breaking.

Scratches are topical abrasions of the finish film that don't penetrate to the wood below. Often caused by picks, belt buckles, shirt buttons, and other everyday menaces, these can quickly make a brand-new guitar look worn—just ask any luthier who has ever exhibited at a guitar show! Fortunately, since scratches are topical, they are often easier to repair. Fine ones can often be made to disappear with a simple buffing. I use and recommend the Novus #2 liquid polish for anyone that wishes to try this themselves. Use a soft cloth and fairly firm pressure, and buff until the surface regains a glossy sheen. If you're lucky, a small scratch will just vanish.

Deeper scratches, such as those sometimes left by string ends on headpieces or around the bridge, may need wet sanding with fine-grit sandpaper prior to buffing, to cut the finish down to the level of the bottom of the

scratch and establish a new surface. This is fussy work, and best left to professionals. The film thickness of many fine instrument finishes is often less than .010-inch thick, and it can be all too easy to sand through entirely—an outcome that is very best avoided.

The final broad category is finish cracks, which are fractures in the film itself. (Please note that I am not discussing cracks in the wood itself in this case, just the finish.) This type of damage often occurs on guitars with thicker finishes, when the film becomes thick enough to be rigid. Wooden instruments move and fluctuate with humidity and temperature changes, and a successful finish is thin and flexible enough to accommodate that movement. When it is too thick, it will be unable to move with the wood, and it will simply crack instead. In the best cases, it will develop the fine-line checking pattern that is often sought-after in vintage guitars. However, in other cases, especially those that have resulted from sudden extreme shifts in temperature, the cracks are much less appealing to look at.



Martin Keith

GOT A QUESTION?

Uncertain about guitar care and maintenance? The ins-and-outs of guitar building? Or another topic related to your gear? Ask *Acoustic Guitar's* repair expert Martin Keith by sending an email titled "Repair Expert" to Editors.AG@stringletter.com and we'll forward it to Keith.



If AG selects your question for publication, you'll receive a complimentary copy of AG's *Acoustic Guitar Owner's Manual*.

Finish cracks can often be dealt with by using capillary action to draw a repairing substance into the crack. On modern finishes, I have seen cracks and other problems vanish before my eyes as I applied a drop of water-thin cyanoacrylate (aka super glue). The glue is drawn into the crack, and bonds to both sides of the fracture, restoring strength and optical clarity to the film. The same technique works with vintage lacquer, though much more care is needed when using these glues around lacquer—their solvents will dissolve the surrounding finish, so any stray drop can cause a problem. Lacquer retarder, an additive designed to slow the curing of lacquer during spraying, is also sometimes used to repair topical fractures in the same way.

Getting back to your guitar: This is a compound problem, as you have both a surface disturbance (dent) and some associated cracking in the finish. When faced with this kind of touchup, I usually start by evaluating the overall condition and value of the instrument. If it is otherwise pristine and has the potential to be a collectible-grade guitar, then a fairly advanced approach to touchup may be required. However, if the instrument is a “player” with some normal wear for its

age, then I may use a slightly less fussy approach. I would likely start by using butyl cellosolve or lacquer retarder to minimize the appearance of the checking. If the dent is shallow and the instrument is not museum-grade, I might then build up the surface back to level using medium-viscosity superglue, applied in fairly thin layers and allowed to dry without chemical acceleration. Once built up to above the original surface, this can be sanded flat and buffed to a gloss that will match the surrounding lacquer fairly well. Despite the fact that the wood is still dented, this kind of repair can often be surprisingly difficult to spot.

If the dent is deeper, a common technique is to try to use heat and moisture to reswell the wood back into shape before touchup. This can be very effective, but it must be done carefully—heat and moisture are also dangerous to lacquer finishes, and the wrong approach can cause hazes or blushing in the lacquer, dark spots, burns, and other problems. However, with experience and a light touch, a skillful touchup artist can often use a well-placed drop of water and some heat to steam the wood back into shape, dramatically reducing

the depth and severity of a dent. I have even had moderate luck applying water and heat below the ding from inside the guitar, rather than coming at it from above.

Touchup techniques go far beyond what is described above, and the best touchup artists use all variety of tricks, from painting in grain lines to chemically aging either the wood or the repair so it will blend with a vintage guitar’s surface. This work lies at the intersection of chemistry, fine art, and highest-level woodworking, and often involves tricks and improvisations that reveal a brilliant mind at work.

Some repair techs, such as the truly amazing Iris Carr, bring the work to a level that defies belief, but not every instrument requires such a level of work. An experienced luthier or tech has usually seen dozens or hundreds of guitars with typical dings and dents, and has a vocabulary of techniques to minimize their visual impact. The nitrocellulose on your Martin is probably the most serviceable finish ever used on a production guitar, as well as the most common, so a competent repairperson can most likely make it much less obvious. Good luck!

AC

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Taylor GTe Urban Ash and TaylorSense

A little guitar that packs a punch—and an app that helps you maintain it

BY EMILE MENASCHÉ

Some players are diligent about caring for their instruments, dropping them right into their cases after every use and always storing them in temperature- and humidity-controlled environments. These guitarists refill their instrument humidifiers like clockwork, and they never, ever leave a guitar in the car after a gig.

Despite having good intentions, I am admittedly not among this cohort—and a few of my instruments have the cracks to prove it. That's why I find the TaylorSense Guitar Health Monitoring System so intriguing. Combining an iOS/Android app with a Bluetooth-equipped smart battery compartment, the technology provides critical data on humidity, temperature, impact damage, and battery life—everything you need to know to keep your Taylor guitar in good health.

I got a chance to test the TaylorSense system preinstalled on one of the latest Taylor models, the GTe Urban Ash. (The GT stands for Grand Theater and the e for electronics.) Before digging into the tech, however, the guitar itself deserves some attention.

FAMILIAR CURVES, NEW DIMENSIONS

Taylor calls the Grand Theater a new category in size, feel, and sound. I don't know if I'd go that far—there's been a trend towards smaller, player-friendly instruments over the last few years. But the GT does bring a new element to Taylor's product line without straying from the company's core design philosophy. The GT's curves are based on Taylor's largest body size, the Grand Orchestra, scaled down for comfort and portability.

At 18.5 inches long, 15 wide and 3.75 deep, the GTe is compact yet provides enough volume to produce a full sound with plenty of overtones. Taylor says its new C-class bracing plays an important role in the GT's ability to punch above its weight sonically. Maybe it also helps





with the GT's impressive consistency across the frequency spectrum—more on that in a bit.

The review model sports a Sitka spruce top and urban ash back and sides cut from trees in need of removal from municipal areas in Southern California, reflecting Taylor's commitment to sustainably and ethically sourcing tonewoods. (For the backstory, see "Taylor Guitars Discovers a New Sustainable Tonewood in Its Own Backyard" at AcousticGuitar.com.)

INSPIRING PLAYABILITY AND TONE

Made from tropical mahogany, the guitar's neck sits extremely comfortably in my hand. The matte finish provides a broken-in feel right out of the box. At 24.125 inches, the GT's 20-fret eucalyptus fingerboard is significantly shorter than the standard 25.5-inch scale, yet it doesn't play like a travel guitar or student model. Even with my long fingers, all the proportions feel just right.

As usual from Taylor, the action is low, the intonation true, and the frets well-dressed. A black Tusq nut and Micarta saddle provide a solid and resonant foundation for the strings. The tuning stability is exceptional, even when subjected to heavy bends. To me, playability isn't just about fingering ease or comfort. It's also about the ability to produce inspiring tone and project it to your audience. I'll take an instrument that requires more effort if the resulting tone is better. Sometimes, however, you get

both—the GT I tested definitely combines playing ease with effortless sound production.

As you might expect with a smaller body, the GT's bass is tight, as opposed to deep. But it's not thin, and the GT's strumming sound would fit nicely in a rock/pop/country band mix. Meanwhile, the midrange and upper registers really jump off the instrument. The highs are crisp without being spikey; the mids are articulate and clear. As a result, the GT sounds balanced across its frequency range with a consistent blend from low to high. Six-note chords have a strong and articulate presence; the tones blend but didn't blur.

If strumming is a strength, then fingerstyle and single notes are the GT's superpower. Okay, maybe that's overstating it. But the same qualities that give the chords so much presence really add to the pleasure of fingerpicking on the instrument. It's easy to control the attack, tone, dynamics, and sustain across arpeggios, making something relatively mundane, like a figure based on an open C chord, seem full of possibilities. I also really appreciate the GT's strong midrange and fast attack for lead playing. The shorter scale makes string bending easier, but the tension doesn't feel too loose or indefinite.

The GTe is equipped with Taylor's Expression System 2 (ES2), which uses a trio of undersaddle sensors, each calibrated to capture a pair of strings. Controls include bass, treble, and volume, with the knobs mounted unobtrusively on the guitar's shoulder. A phase switch is housed on the preamp itself, which is accessible through the soundhole. The ES2 has been around for a while, so I won't do a full review here, other than to say it works as expected and does quite a nice job of capturing the GTe's core tone.

TAYLORSENSE

Fitting in the battery box at the base of the GTe, the TaylorSense system (\$79.99 street) is even less intrusive than the controls for the electronics. (Note: Taylor guitars are not currently being sold with TaylorSense preinstalled.) The system can be retrofitted to any Taylor guitar with electronics powered by a 9-volt battery—those equipped with Taylor's Expression System (ES1, ES2), ES-T, or ES-N pickups will work. (Taylors using AA batteries are not compatible.)

If you already have an acoustic-electric Taylor but aren't sure which pickup system it has, the company's website offers illustrated instructions on how to check compatibility, order the right version, and install the electronics. Based on the online instructions, retrofitting the battery box on an existing guitar looks like a relatively easy DIY process requiring no specialized tools.

With a simple and intuitive interface, the TaylorSense app has four main features: A digital hygrometer, which monitors the humidity level of the guitar; a thermometer that reads the ambient temperature; impact sensors that alert you when your guitar takes a serious knock (like through a careless airline baggage handler); and a gauge that warns you when the battery power drops below 30 percent (and again when it dips below ten percent).

Setup was easy. First, I downloaded the app, then registered the guitar and app with Taylor. With the app installed, I followed the instructions to gently place my phone near the soundhole, open and close the battery compartment, and presto, the guitar started transmitting data to my phone. With unseasonably tropical early fall weather in New York, I immediately got a red alert: The app told me that humidity averaged 65 percent over a 72-hour period, a bit above the recommended range of 40–60 percent.

To tackle the problem, I clicked the Fix button right below the humidity display. Clearly written instructions explained how the guitar could be affected by high and low humidity. The app recommended putting the guitar in its case and using D'Addario's Two-Way Humidification System to bring it back within range.

Affordable and apparently easy to install, the TaylorSense system is a no-brainer if you own a Taylor and are concerned about keeping it in a safe environment. To me, TaylorSense's humidity monitor and alert system alone is worth the price of admission, especially because it will continue tracking the instrument's condition when it's put away in its case. And after getting four-figure repair estimates on cracked guitars, I can only wish I'd had those warnings coming to my phone over the years.

URBAN COOL

As a package, the GTe Urban Ash really impressed me. This is the second Taylor built from non-traditional tonewoods I've tested recently. (See a review of the AD27 in the November/December 2020 issue.) Both guitars have demonstrated that there's plenty to be gained from exploring new materials, especially when those materials are mated to clever and well-executed designs.

Even with its smaller dimensions, the GTe doesn't feel like a travel guitar and plays and sounds like a front-line instrument. As for the idea of an acoustic guitar made from ash, Taylor does offer GT models built from more traditional woods, with fancier finishes—and higher price tags. But considering its sound, playability, cool factor, and price, the GTe Urban Ash is a total winner.

AC

SPECS

BODY 14-fret Grand Theater shape; Sitka spruce top with C-Class bracing; urban ash back and sides; ebony bridge with Micarta saddle; tortoise pickguard; Urban Sienna finish

NECK 24-1/8"-scale tropical mahogany neck; dual-action truss rod; eucalyptus fretboard; 20 frets; 1-23/32" black Tusq nut; Taylor nickel mini tuners

OTHER Taylor Expression System 2 electronics; Elixir Phosphor Bronze Light strings (.012–.053); Taylor AeroCase; left-handed available

MADE IN United States

PRICE \$1,599 street, plus \$79.99 for TaylorSense (sold separately)

taylorguitars.com

Breedlove Pursuit Exotic S Concert Edgeburst CE

A responsibly sourced acoustic-electric with a rich and dynamic voice

BY EMILE MENASCHÉ

Designed in the U.S. and built in China, Breedlove's Pursuit Exotic S series was conceived to be more than just another entry-level import line. Yes, starting at \$749, these guitars cost a fraction of their American-made counterparts. But according to Breedlove, they also demonstrate both the need for and the benefits of using unusual and sustainable tonewoods—and of sourcing those materials responsibly.

Breedlove's website lists 11 Pursuit Exotic S models, with a range of wood and finish combinations, from \$539 street. At \$1,399, the single cutaway acoustic-electric Pursuit Exotic S Concert Edgeburst CE featured here sits at the top of the series' price pyramid—but it's still about \$700 less expensive than Breedlove's lowest priced U.S.-built Concert model.

HANDSOME AND WELL BUILT

Right out of the box, the Pursuit's appearance lives up to the Exotic handle, thanks to a dramatically figured solid koa top highlighted by Breedlove's Edgeburst gloss finish. Photographs don't quite capture the beauty of the koa's contrasting grains, with dark stripes flowing along the length of the top, offset by rich tobacco brown. The back and sides are made from layered koa and African mahogany. Though less eye-catching than the top, their grain and finish continue the visual statement to give the guitar a cohesive appearance.

The 25.3-inch scale 20-fret fingerboard is made from ovankol, a sustainable alternative to rosewood, as is the bridge. Both the 1.69-inch nut and bridge saddle are Tusq, a synthetic ivory substitute. Other details include handsome faux tortoiseshell binding, brass





fretboard inlays, and an attractive matte copper motif seen in the headstock's Breedlove logo, as well as the tuners and strap buttons.

In terms of fit and finish, almost every detail is outstanding right out of the box. The neck's satiny texture is smooth and comfortable. The nicely dressed frets and well-rounded nut all feel great to the touch—not a jagged edge to be found. Intonation is spot on, and tuning proved to be remarkably stable in typically unpredictable Northeast weather. Often, I'd take the guitar off its stand, strum a chord, and find it was still in tune from the day before.

My only complaint is that the action above the tenth fret is a little high for my taste. Looking closely, however, I'd say setup is more to blame than construction. If I owned the guitar, I'd take it to a trusted tech, and a good guitar dealer would probably adjust the setup before it hit the display rack.

TONAL PURSUITS

When it comes to gig-friendly instruments, it's hard to beat a concert-sized guitar. The body dimensions are comfortable, while still providing enough volume to produce very strong tone. At 19.875 inches long, the Pursuit's box ranges from 3.58 inches deep at the neck to 4.2 inches at the tail block. With a 15.37-inch lower bout, 11.28-inch upper bout, and a nine-inch waist, the guitar hangs nicely on the strap and perches happily on the knee.

SPECS

BODY Cutaway Concert shape; solid koa top; layered African mahogany and koa back and sides; ovangkol bridge; Tusq saddle with 2-1/8" spacing; faux tortoiseshell binding; Edgeburst finish

NECK 25.3" scale African mahogany neck; 20 frets; ovangkol fretboard with 16" radius; 1-11/16" Tusq nut; copper closed-gear tuners; stained satin finish

OTHER D'Addario XT Phosphor Bronze Light strings (.012–.053); Fishman Presys I electronics

MADE IN China

PRICE \$1,399 street

breedlovemusic.com

The Pursuit's African mahogany neck joins the body at the 14th fret, with an unobtrusive cutaway open to around the 16th fret. Its profile is rounded and moderately deep—fitting in what I think of as the comfortable middle—and should accommodate most players.

Unplugged, the Pursuit has a rich, warm sound that projects well, with a strong midrange emphasis and tight but polite low end. Played fingerstyle, the midrange emphasis adds weight to arpeggiated lines and single-note passages. The guitar isn't as bright or cutting as you might get from other tonewood combinations, and whether that's a plus or minus is really a matter of individual taste and musical application.

Some players might prefer a punchier bass relative to the midrange, but plenty of guitars deliver that kind of sound. The Pursuit's midrange focus makes for a nice contrast to more conventional-sounding flattops. I really like

Unplugged, the Pursuit has a rich, warm sound that projects well, with a strong midrange emphasis and tight but polite low end.

how smoothly the tone transitions from low to midrange to treble—especially on arpeggiated chords and stacked triads.

Still, if the Pursuit I tested has one outstanding strength, it's the way it resonates and sustains with bell-like overtones on single notes. Held notes have an impressively long and steady decay, and after I lift my fingers, the guitar maintains the harmonic vibrations in a way that makes simple passages sing. Even expensive guitars can sound a bit thin on the high E string, but the Pursuit's mid focus lends fullness to those notes as well.

Changes to finger and pick attack demonstrate the guitar's range of sonic colors. Strummed, it produces a loud and muscular sound that would hold its own in a fairly large ensemble. It wouldn't take much to overpower a quiet instrument or singer, so dynamic awareness is essential. A lighter pick seems to open

up the sound for strummed chords, while the pad of the thumb produces a percussive "thunk" for jazzier comping.

SIMPLE BUT EFFECTIVE ELECTRONICS

While not all models in the Pursuit series come with onboard electronics, those in the Exotic S subcategory sport a Fishman Presys piezo pickup and preamp system. The control panel sits in the guitar's upper shoulder—not the prettiest solution, though it's more compact than that of most preamps. Instead of being housed in the endpin, the output jack sits in a panel on the lower side of the guitar, which also has a battery compartment—a plus since you can add or remove a strap without unplugging.

The Presys' control layout is basic but effective: You get a single volume knob and push-buttons for Contour (a mid-cutting EQ), Phase, and Tuner. The preamp puts out plenty of level. Some players might prefer a more elaborate onboard EQ, but I find the simplicity appealing. Unless you're plugging into an amp or mixer with inadequate tone controls, an onboard EQ isn't strictly necessary.

If you need a tonal variation, the Contour button works well. There's more midrange with the button up (off); activating the control produces a nice scoop that brings out the bass and treble—perfect for open chord strumming. The overall level doesn't change much between the two settings, so you could easily use Contour to switch from scooped rhythm to thick lead. The Presys also has an onboard tuner, which mutes the output when active. It may not be fancy, but it's fast, its display is very easy to read, and it's accurate enough for day-to-day use.

PURSuing NEW IDEAS

Taken on its own, the Breedlove Pursuit Exotic S Concert Edgeburst CE is an attractive and well-made guitar at a reasonable price. If the instrument I tested is anything to go by, a good setup is all you'd need to make for a gigging workhorse equally effective for unplugged or amplified performances. Unplugged, its mid-focused timbre and overtone rich sustain give it a unique voice that encourages melodic playing.

But I think there's also a bigger picture to consider. If Breedlove's use of alternative woods is meant to be a statement about sustainable guitar building, I'd argue that delivering that message through a relatively affordable product like this makes the Pursuit Exotic S series more than an exercise in socially responsible messaging. Over time, this may bring these materials into the mainstream while encouraging sustainable growth and harvesting. That's a noble pursuit indeed. **AC**

iZotope Spire Studio

Next-generation recorder gives pro-quality audio results on the fly

BY JAMES VOLPE ROTONDI

Talk to singer-songwriters at any level and the majority of them will tell you that they capture their song ideas on their smartphones, using voice memo, video, or other nonmusical apps, which don't allow them to do anything with the tracks they've captured. Others will tell you they use dedicated recording software, though they might complain that the setup costs and the required technical mindset, which drains valuable emotional and creative energy that could be used for, well, writing songs, are too restrictive.

This is where iZotope Spire Studio (\$299 street) comes in. It's a professional songwriting device on a very human scale. Spire uses the power and storage space of that phone or tablet you already spend too much time on, via the free, sophisticated Spire: Music Recorder & Studio recording/processing app. And Spire Studio uses its own Wi-Fi network to outsource the tracking equipment to a small, cylindrical device that's about the size of a peanut butter jar and weighs in around 1.5 lbs. It's a whip-smart compact sketch pad that, especially in its new second-generation form, is packed with professional features that make it double as a proper tracking device.

The very sturdy yet light and compact Spire Studio unit contains a built-in omnidirectional condenser microphone, two preamps (upgraded in the second generation), and a pair of headphone outputs, plus transport controls, meters, two XLR/TS mic/line inputs with phantom power, and more—all excellent. Spire Studio runs via an AC power adapter or rechargeable batteries. It's even cute, kinda like Darth Vader's tiny baby brother. (I do wish it came with a protective travel bag, though.)

Working with the Spire Song Maker/Spire Studio partnership is really liberating, and this is also where the second-generation features really shine. Put your headphones on, plug them into Spire Studio, connect via the Spire Studio Wi-Fi network, and launch the app. Press the Soundcheck button on Spire Studio as



COURTESY OF IZOTOPE

you strum your guitar, sing, or both: Spire Studio will speak to the app, identify the instrument you're using, and set your ideal input levels and EQ settings for you.

That's huge right there. If you like, find a vocal, guitar, or master effect that inspires you—everything from vocal tuning to modulation to compression and beyond—or wait until afterwards, when you can choose from that same fine array of effects drawn from iZotope's well-regarded Ozone, Nectar, and other pro signal-processing plugins. Spire Studio will automatically add compression, EQ, and saturation to vocals for a refined sound that would take the uninitiated hours to dial in.

Find your tempo by tapping it in, or simply setting it, and start recording. (You can also record without a click, naturally. And you can import beats, and track to them, too.) When you've finished, the latest Spire Studio will even clean up your audio for you, removing unwanted air conditioner hum, plosives, street noise, etc., using tools culled from iZotope's RX line, like Noise Removal and Pop Filter.

Again, that's a huge amount of work you won't have to think about. (Some features will require the Spire Pro subscription, which is free of charge.)

Do another take, add an overdub, a harmony, up to eight tracks in all. To mix, go to the mix page on the Spire Song Maker app: Use the little grid display to touch-move instruments around the stereo field or add effects—from lovely reverbs and delays to raunchy distortions and compression—and even widen or narrow the stereo field with ease.

Immediately upload your piece within the Song Maker app to Soundcloud or social media; export your complete masterpiece as a WAV or M4A file, or export the individual tracks/stems to send to your collaborators, producer, or band members for use and further processing on your album. Yes, the tracks sound that good.

The second-generation Spire Studio is exactly the kind of device that acoustic players and songwriters in particular will absolutely thrive on creatively. You might say it's made for our tribe. **izotope.com** **AC**

Hercules Stands

Practical new products for producing audio and video content at home

BY NICK ROSSI

Of the many challenges that have arisen for guitarists over the past year and a half, perhaps the most daunting has been how high the bar of home audio-video production has been raised. With so many players of all proficiency levels providing so much well-produced online content, effectively turning one's home studio, workstation, or corner of the room into a viable recording, streaming, or teaching space is becoming the rule rather than the exception.

Hercules Stands offers new products to aid in these pursuits. The DG107B universal mic and camera arm stand (\$59.99), which can be used in conjunction with the EZ microphone clip (an additional \$14.99), provides a sturdy

yet flexible way to temporarily clamp a microphone or camera to a desk or table. Out of the box, the unit is solid, with a minimum of plastic parts. The black metal construction gives it a professional feel and the included Velcro cable ties help keep things tidy. With two swivel points and a 360-degree radius at the clamp joint, it's a versatile piece of equipment that's relatively easy to set up. I found the unit worked best in conjunction with the standard kind of shelving found in contemporary wall and workspace units, which likely will appeal to a good number of players working out of smaller spaces.

Hercules' DG207B universal smartphone holder (\$39.99) and DG307B 2-in-1 tablet and



phone holder (\$49.99) can mount to a desk/table or to the above stand, perfect for capturing both smartphone/tablet video and microphone audio. Like the mic stand, the holders are sturdy, and their rubber teeth gently cradle a smartphone or tablet with ease. Other potential applications include use in studio, home, or live settings, either as a recording device or a performance aid. The succinct, easy-to-follow instructions will have one ready to go in no time. herculesstands.com **AC**

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THE VILLAGE OUT WEST The Lost Tapes of Alan Oakes



Various Artists

The Village Out West: The Lost Tapes of Alan Oakes
Field Recordings of the 1960s California Folk Music Scene
(Smithsonian Folkways Recording)



BARRY OLIVER

PLAYLIST

Doc Watson, John Cohen, and Mississippi John Hurt at the Berkeley Folk Festival, 1964.

Lost '60s Folk from the Golden State

New set reveals a vital scene thousands of miles from Greenwich Village

BY DERK RICHARDSON

The centrality of New York's Greenwich Village in the folk music revival—aka “the great folk scare”—of the 1950s and '60s cannot be denied. But the Village back East was not the only epicenter of passion for traditional and old-time acoustic music in the United States, as amply evidenced in a new two-CD set of recordings captured at festivals, concerts, music workshops, and house parties in Northern and Central California. The environs of NYC's Bleeker and MacDougal streets gave us such beloved icons as Dave Van Ronk and Fred Neil, and such future celebrities as Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and Peter, Paul & Mary. But “The Village Out West”—a California sprawl that ranged from Berkeley (home to

the influential Berkeley Folk Music Festival, 1958–1971) to Fresno—was (and still is) a hotbed of vernacular music in its own right, appreciation of which is deepened in this 51-track sampler from the lost tapes of civil engineer, folk music aficionado, and amateur audio engineer Alan Oakes.

Something like a minor league Alan Lomax or Harry Smith, Oakes, who died in 2019, would have remained obscure and unsung had not his widow, Marnie, contacted Deborah Robins, the folk-singing partner of Larry Hanks. Robins took the tapes to Oakland, California, sound engineer Mark “Wally” McClellan for digitization, and to musician/writer/radio producer Henry H. Sapoznik for cataloging.

Robins, Sapoznik, and Jeff Place co-produced the set, which includes illuminating essays, musician biographies, poster reproductions, and historical photographs.

Apparently recorded mostly from 1965 to 1971 (not every track is identified with a date and venue), the performances bounce around genres and idioms: bluegrass, gospel, old-time folk and string-band music, Piedmont and Delta blues, Celtic ballads, Woody Guthrie tunes. Despite the ad hoc recording setups, the sound is stunningly good, with minimal amounts of ambient and/or audience noise, a testament to Oakes' mic placement and McClellan's restoration skills. CD 1 opens with a version of “Beaumont Rag” performed by Hank Bradley on fiddle, Doc Watson on guitar, and Rick Shubb (of Shubb capos fame) on banjo, and CD 2 closes with the same trio playing “O, Them Golden Slippers.” In between, we are treated to a survey of a scene that makes us both envious of those who partook firsthand and grateful to Oakes for obsessively hauling his tape recorder into clubs such as the Jabberwock in Berkeley and the Old Gallery in Fresno, as well as various living rooms, including his own.

In addition to Watson, who's featured on eight songs, the big names from back East include blues giant Mississippi Fred McDowell, fingerpicking icon Reverend Gary Davis, the New Lost City Ramblers (Mike Seeger, John Cohen, and Tracy Schwarz), and singer-songwriter Mark Spoelstra (who relocated to California after success in New York and Cambridge). They add abundant star power, but the locals prove themselves worthy company with stellar guitar-picking, banjo-plucking, fiddling, and singing. Among the West Coasters are natives (including Bradley, Shubb, guitarist Sandy Rothman, guitarist-singers Larry Hanks and Roger Perkins, harmonica ace Will Scarlett, and fiddler Sue Draheim) and transplants (Scottish singer Alan MacLeod, Caribbean-bred Roger Renwick, Missourian fiddler Ron Hughey, Kentuckian fiddler Dad Crockett, Arkansas-born singing guitarist Jim Ringer, and others).

Every listener will zero in on favorite tracks and discoveries; perhaps unaccompanied vocalist LaWanda Ultan, solo banjoists Gene Bluestein or Jerry Houck, or autoharpist-singer Kilby Snow. The singing duos of Kathy & Carol, Hanks with Spoelstra or Perkins, Caroline and Sandy Paton, and Sandy and Jeanie Darlington are riveting, and the several appearances of Sweet's Mill Mountain Boys and the Bradley-Shubb-Watson trio are especially energized. The combined senses of intimacy and exuberance throughout make for listening as delightful as it is enlightening.

AC



Sarah McQuaid

The St. Buryan Sessions

(Shovel and a Spade)

A beautiful reimagination of her finest songs

With all her concert dates cancelled by the coronavirus, singer-songwriter Sarah McQuaid decided to stay close to home, recording in the English village where she's lived for the past 14 years. There, in the cavernous 15th-century St. Buryan's Church, playing solo to engineer/producer Martin Stansbury, she collected two decades of songs and reimagined them into the strongest album of her career, also released as a series of YouTube videos.

McQuaid's voice, a fragile, starkly resonant alto, has always been a thing of folk-trad beauty, but here, with ambient mics placed around the church's interior, it takes on a new joyfulness and a deeper darkness. At the same time, her beloved Andy Manson acoustic guitar keeps all its warm, ringing precision, while her DADGAD tuning takes on a rich, plangent sustain as its sound travels up and down the nave. (If you listen closely, you can hear trucks driving past the church, and the distant chattering of swallows.)

The album's only "new" song is a shimmering version of the jazz standard "Autumn Leaves," while the rest are highlights from her catalog, including "Last Song," which intertwines the lives of mother, daughter, and granddaughter; the instrumental "The Day of Wrath, That Day," performed on electric guitar; and the beautifully brittle "Time to Love," about the present moment. All gain in subtlety, wisdom, and understanding in these solo arrangements. Best of all, 2012's "In Derby Cathedral"—where McQuaid sings of the names carved into the church's stone walls—takes on new life, deftly merging past and present. —Kenny Berkowitz



George Harrison

All Things Must Pass

(Deluxe 50th Anniversary Edition)

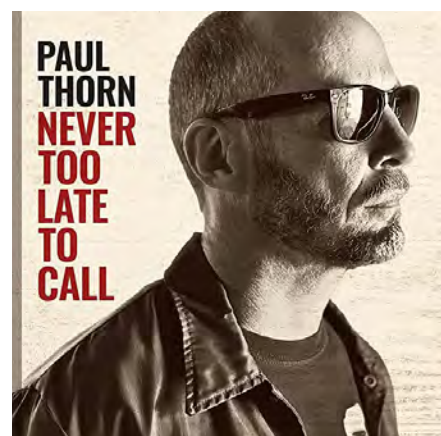
(Apple/Capitol/Universal)

A solid remix plus acoustic demos

The triple-LP *All Things Must Pass* marked George Harrison's transition from Beatle to solo artist, though he already had produced 1968's *Wonderwall Music* soundtrack and 1969's synth-laden *Electronic Music*, both instrumental. *All Things Must Pass*, co-produced by Harrison and Phil Spector (who had worked with The Beatles on *Let It Be*), is steeped in the ex-Beatle's devotion to Indian philosophy and reverence for rock 'n' roll.

This remastered, super deluxe 50th anniversary edition, executive produced by Harrison's son, Dhani, and remixed by Paul Hicks, tamps down Spector's original dense, reverb-heavy wall of sound, which included Harrison, Peter Frampton, and three members of Badfinger all playing acoustic guitars. It includes five CDs and a Blu-ray disc with Dolby Atmos, 5.1 surround, and hi-res stereo mixes. There's also a 60-page book and a poster.

Thirty previously unreleased demos, most acoustic guitar driven, include such flattop nuggets as a stripped-down title track and a Dylan-esque version of "Apple Scruffs"—Dylan wrote "If Not for You" for the album and collaborated with Harrison on "I'd Have You Anytime." Dylan's influence also is felt on "Ballad of Sir Frankie Crisp (Let It Roll)" and the hybrid-picked demo of "Run of the Mill." The breezy acoustic-rock mantra "Dehra Dun," the cheeky "Cosmic Empire," and the melodic "Tell Me What Has Happened to You" are among 13 demos that didn't make the album's final cut. But it's especially rewarding to hear the unplugged version of "My Sweet Lord," the hit single that captured the spirit of '70s-era counterculture kids who went in search of spirituality in the late hippie era. —Greg Cahill



Paul Thorn

Never Too Late to Call

(Perpetual Obscurity/Thirty Tigers)

12th album is his most stirring yet

There's no one else like Paul Thorn, a walking contradiction of saint and sinner, boxer and poet, tough guy and sensitive soul, Mississippi belter and acoustic guitarist. They're all gathered here on *Never Too Late to Call*, his 12th album, held together with an honest sense of his shortcomings, an insistent moral compass, and a healthy dose of country funk.

The album opens with the quiet fingerpicking of "Two Tears of Joy," a chance for Thorn to preach the gospel of gratitude to his family and his god, thankful that the "mercy they've shown me has made me wanna be a better man." It closes with the Ole Miss-inspired "Holy Hottie Toddy," a hard-partying anthem about loving everybody right now, celebrating the glorious mess we're in, because "life goes by so fast you better not blink/ You might not have as much time as you think."

In between, there's an unsent letter to his sister ("Never Too Late to Call"), an aching confessional ("What I Could Do"), a string-snapping homage to James Brown ("Sapalo"), a keyboard-rocking devotional ("Here We Go"), and a door-slamming duet with his wife that tests the waters between giving up and staying put ("Breaking Up for Good Again"). Thorn's four-piece road band rocks solid on a handful of up-tempo cuts, but really, the show is Thorn's songwriting, his raspy baritone, and his nearly-solo acoustic and gut-string guitars. That's what makes *Never Too Late to Call* his most serious, most stirring album yet, with all the heartbreaking vulnerability a former middleweight can muster. —KB



Buffalo Nichols

Buffalo Nichols

(Fat Possum)

Hard-hitting blues on great debut album

Born in Houston, Carl Nichols took a winding road to the blues, passing through a long series of Baptist church gigs, Milwaukee bars, European cafés, and West African tours before returning to the States, breaking up his folk duo, and landing solo in Austin. Now billing himself as Buffalo Nichols, he's writing songs that channel the music he heard growing up into a weary, deeply lived vision that's focused on "putting more Black stories" into acoustic blues.

At heart, he's a storyteller, confessing the blues in tales of broken promises, gunshot wounds, traffic stops gone wrong, cross-eyed looks in the mirror, and late-night tours of Hell from people who swear they're "gonna find out how bad things can get." Real bad, that's for sure, and despite all that suffering, there's a sweetness in Nichols' playing, which relies on open C# tuning, a brass slide on his ring finger, and a couple of rough-and-ready resonator guitars by Mule and Recording King.

After years as a journeyman, playing everything from country to death metal, Nichols distilled his influences into a restlessly contemporary, hard-hitting blues, calling on the ghosts of R.L. Burnside, Elmore James, Blind Willie Johnson, Blind Willie McTell, Bukka White, and a long line of blues-rock guitarists. On this startlingly good debut, Nichols stakes out a new name and a new style, finding a voice that perfectly fits the moment. And like the speaker in "These Things," he's ready to face the future head-on, knowing "I'm beaten and I'm broken/ but I'm coming back for more." —KB

Bob Dylan, Karen Dalton, and Fred Neil



COURTESY OF GREENWICH ENTERTAINMENT

Karen Dalton: In My Own Time

Underappreciated folk music figure gets her due

BY BLAIR JACKSON

One of the most compelling and enigmatic figures to emerge during the Greenwich Village folk era, Karen Dalton (1937–1993), as Bob Dylan famously noted in his book *Chronicles*, "sang like Billie Holiday and played guitar like Jimmy Reed." That's no exaggeration, though I'd say her fine guitar playing was as informed by folk sources—she primarily played a Gibson 12-string, as well as six-string and banjo. She was, first and foremost, an interpreter of blues and folk tunes (old and new), but her recorded output was slight: just two albums—the moody, stripped-down, folk-blues masterpiece *It's So Hard to Tell Who Loves You the Best* in 1969 and the more musically ambitious (and to my ears, over-produced) *In My Own Time* in 1971. Neither was commercially successful. When she died in 1993 of AIDS-related complications at the age of 55, following years of drug abuse and unsuccessful stints in rehab, she had all but been forgotten.

However, just as the brilliant but doomed Nick Drake has been rediscovered in the decades since his passing, so, too, has Karen Dalton been embraced by new generations of admiring musicians and fans. The culmination of this latter-day fascination with Dalton is a beautifully made and quite moving

documentary called *Karen Dalton: In My Own Time*, directed by Richard Peete and Robert Yapkovitz. Using a combination of rare footage of Dalton performing, archival photographs, illuminating interviews with fellow musicians, friends, and lovers, plus excerpts from her poetry, letters, and other writings (read by Angel Olsen), the filmmakers trace Dalton's saga—her days growing up poor in rural Oklahoma, marrying and having her first child in her mid-teens; heading to New York and falling into the Greenwich Village folk scene, where she was widely acclaimed; her peripatetic nature and her discomfort with some of the demands of the music industry, which led to occasional acts of what appear to be career self-sabotage; and her long, sad decline.

But this is no shallow, over-dramatized *Behind the Music* story. Rather, it's a deep, soulful, revelatory exploration of a talented but fragile soul who rarely seemed completely comfortable in her own skin or in the music business. Along the way, we're treated to her heartfelt performances of songs written or popularized by Billie Holiday, Fred Neil, Elmore James, Tim Hardin, Dino Valenti, and others, most featuring Dalton's sure, nuanced 12-string work. I highly recommend you check it out!

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Buck Curran with his 2009 Stefan Sobell Model 1



GUITAR PHOTOS: BLUE-G, TOKYO, JAPAN; ARTIST IMAGE COURTESY OF BUCK CURRAN

2009 Sobell Model 1

The guitar that got away—with a happy ending

BY GREG OLWELL

Nearly every guitarist has a yarn about the one that got away. While most end with some degree of regret and longing, singer-songwriter and guitarist Buck Curran's tale about his 2009 Stefan Sobell Model 1 is more uplifting.

Curran had been fixated on Sobell guitars ever since seeing fingerstyle great Martin Simpson perform on a Butterfly Model 1 back in 1991. Years later, after spending time with a few Sobells that didn't work out for him for one reason or another—including a stint owning Simpson's Butterfly—Curran decided to commission a custom Sobell.

Curran is also a luthier—he worked for Dana Bourgeois from 2002–2009—and he had specific ideas about what he wanted in a guitar. The instrument would have a top made of bearclaw-figured red spruce that Curran had handpicked in Maine, along with a particularly nice set of Madagascar rosewood back and sides from

Sobell's prized tonewood reserves. Curran requested that the back be made from four joined pieces, rather than the customary two, for improved stability. He went with Sobell's Sicilian Model 1 shape, which splits the difference between a 000 and a dreadnought, and eagerly awaited the instrument's completion.

Unfortunately, the challenges of being a full-time musician and family man during the Great Recession ended up making it impossible for Curran to take delivery of his completed dream guitar in 2009, so with great sadness he asked Sobell to sell the finished instrument. As it was based on Curran's particular specs, Sobell had a hard time finding a buyer, and the guitar remained slumbering in his workshop for years.

One day out of the blue, in June 2015, Curran received an email from the luthier Paul Hostetter, who had just visited Sobell's shop and played the

Model 1, telling him how great it was—and that he ought to do whatever was needed to own it. When Curran was in a position to buy the guitar a couple years later, he was keenly disappointed to learn that it had already been sold. He then lost track of the instrument, but kept searching for it until April 2021, when it surfaced at Blue-G, a boutique shop in Japan. The guitar was priced out of reach, but Curran had the good fortune to secure it through a last-minute investor in a crowdsourcing effort, and after 12 long years, it was soon in his hands.

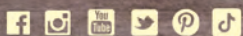
Now that he has it, how does it sound? "It's super responsive—notes just fly out of it. It has huge, complex fundamental tones with plenty of gorgeous overtones," Curran says. "I feel incredibly fortunate to finally have this guitar, and I'm looking forward to recording some improvised guitar instrumentals with it as soon as possible."

AG



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